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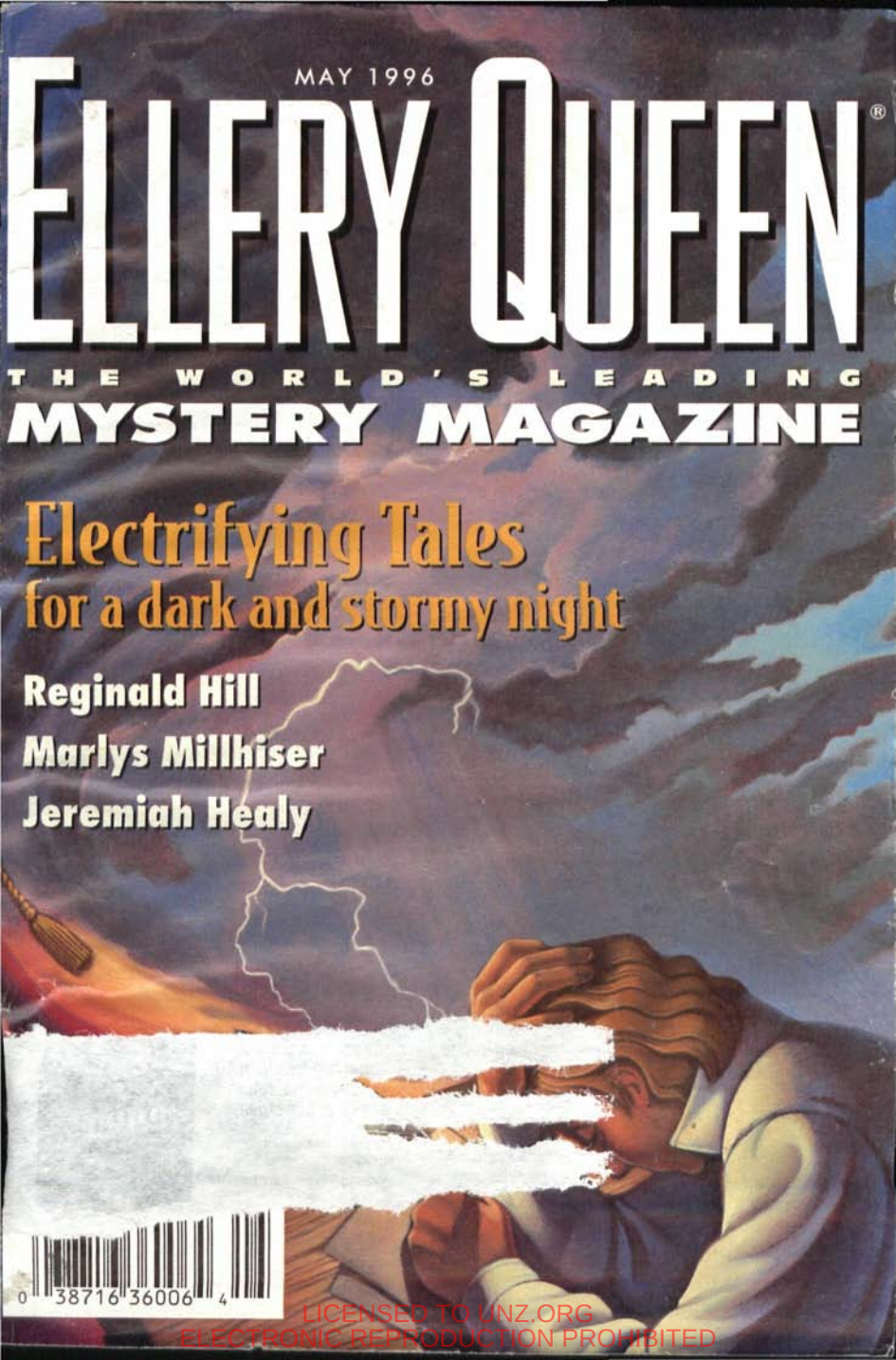

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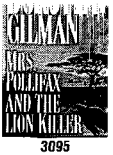

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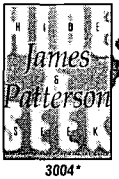

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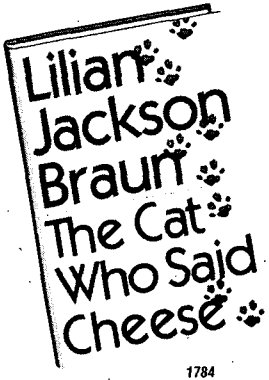

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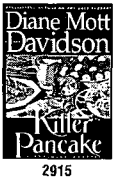

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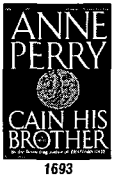

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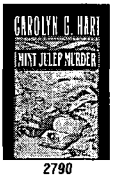

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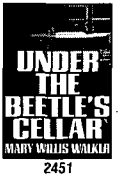

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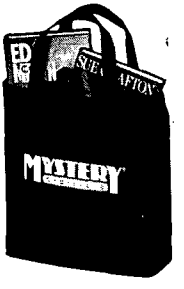

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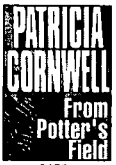

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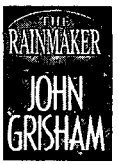

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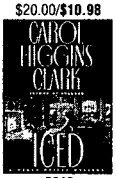

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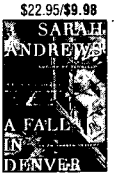

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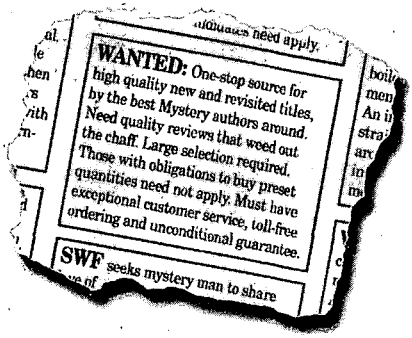
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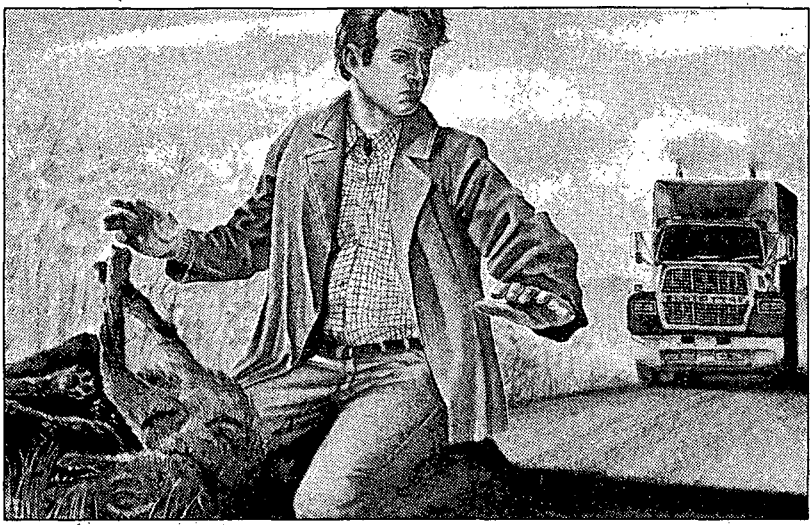

Art by Darryl Elliott

ROADKILL

by Doug Allyn

The dead dog on the shoulder of the road twitched. Only a reflex, David thought, even as he touched his Jeep's brakes and switched on its flashers. He pulled off onto the shoulder of the highway and slowed to a halt a few yards from the dog's body. Big dog, brindle fur. Boxer, maybe? Or a Staff? It was so battered and bloody he couldn't even be sure of the breed. Or whether it was one of his patients. He considered getting a hypo of Socomb, sodium phenobarbital, out of his bag on the off chance the animal was still suffering, but decided against it. The movement he'd noticed was probably windblast from a passing car. The dog certainly wasn't moving now.

Some moron leaned on his horn as he blew past at eighty per. Traffic on the four-lane state road was always fast and furious. Commuters from Algoma or points north hurrying to or from factory jobs in Saginaw. He waited for a break in traffic before climb-

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ing out of the Jeep and trudging up to the dog, automatically cataloguing its injuries. A godawful mess. Belly ripped open, purplish tangle of entrails oozing out onto the gravel, shoulder battered, possibly broken, and blood flowing freely from a dozen different lacerations. Not quite dead yet; there were still some faint, feathery spasms of respiration. But it would only be a matter of minutes now. Maybe less. It looked like it had been hit and run over by some hotshot who probably hadn't even checked his rearview mirror to see what it was.

What it was, was a pit bull, female, four to six years old. David didn't recognize the dog, and he was fairly sure he would have remembered. The breed wasn't common in this part of the state and they were remarkably hardy. He seldom saw them in his veterinary practice.

It's often said that ideas for short stories and ideas for novels differ in kind. But some short stories are, in effect, miniature novels, and their underlying ideas could serve equally well for longer work. Doug Allyn's Mitch Mitchell stories are a good example. Two of the award-winning *EQMM* pieces have now been expanded to book length: *Blackwater* is due out in hardcover this spring; *Icewater Mansions* is available in paperback (both St. Martin's). This month Mr. Allyn continues a newer series with a crime-solving vet.

The dog was wearing an ordinary leather collar, not one of the spiked monstrosities some of the macho clowns who favored this breed seemed to prefer. David knelt beside the dog, slid his fingers along the collar, feeling for a nametag or license so he could inform its owner of what had happened—

She bit him! Her jaws clamped onto his forearm like a vise, holding him immobile. Sweet Jesus! He froze, unable to move, even if he'd wanted to. He could already feel his right hand chilling, going numb, and so far she was only maintaining her hold. She hadn't savaged the arm, or even clamped down on it full force yet. She was just holding him, to keep from being hurt. But pits have jaws

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like metal shears. Dying or not, if she bit down much harder, she could break his wrist. Or sever it.

He shifted his position slightly, trying to read her eyes. They were clouded with pain, but not glazed. She was conscious, or at least partly so. He could feel the faint whisper of her breath on his upper arm. She was terribly injured. Not quite dead, though. But his arm was going to be, and soon, if she didn't let it go. If he'd brought the damned hypo, he'd have put her down on the spot. Death would've been nearly instantaneous, especially for a dog in her condition. But without it, trying to pull free or struggle with her was risky business. Any movement that caused her pain might well cost him his arm.

And so he knelt and began talking to her. Quietly, he tried to explain the situation. That he hadn't meant to hurt her, he'd only stopped to help. That he was the only veterinarian in thirty miles and wouldn't be nearly as useful with only one arm. She didn't seem impressed. He tried stroking her head with his free hand but she growled, or seemed to. It was hard to be sure considering she had a mouthful of his wrist.

He talked nonstop for nearly five minutes, to no effect. Her jaws remained tightly clamped. Maybe she'd forgotten she was holding him, or why. His right hand was totally numb now, and his lower back was on fire from crouching over her. The stench of blood and offal and road dust in his nostrils was beginning to make his stomach churn . . . And then she released him.

Just like that. She relaxed her hold on his wrist and let him go. And lowered her head to the dirt. To die. He rose stiffly, massaging his bruised wrist, staring down at her. She hadn't broken the skin, but his fingers were sizzling with the fiery pinpricks of returning circulation. And his eyes were stinging, too, for no particular reason he could fathom. God knows, he'd seen animals die before. It came with the territory. Some of them, he'd known quite well. Still . . .

A car rocketed past at maximum speed, shaking him with its windblast, horn blaring.

"Asshole!" he yelled, shaking his fist at the driver. And the universe. The hell with this! He stripped off his leather jacket, then his shirt. He made a loop out of the shirtsleeve, slipped it over the dog's muzzle, and tied her jaws closed, apologizing all the while. Then he slid her onto his jacket, picked her up, and sprinted for his Jeep.

At the clinic, he barreled through the front door, yelling for his

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assistant Bettina as he charged past the startled patrons in the waiting room, blood streaming from the maimed animal cradled in his arms. In his surgery, he gently lowered the dog to the stainless-steel operating table. Still alive. Barely.

"Give her atropine intramuscular, skip the Acepromazine," he barked as Bettina, his veterinary tech, trailed him into the small operating room. "She's already in shock. Give her a light dose of sodium pentothal and get a tracheal tube in her. Oxygen, nitrous oxide, and halothane."

"Respiratory monitor?"

"Not now. Her breathing's the least of our problems. I'll check her intestines for lacerations. You start cleaning up the gashes on her torso and throat so we can see what the hell we're into here."

"You'd better scrub," she said. He almost bit her head off. But she was right, of course. No point in suturing the body cavity closed only to have the dog die of infection later. Hell, she was probably going to die on the table anyway.

But she didn't. Bettina anesthetized her without incident. The dog was too weak now to offer even token resistance. The intestines protruding from her belly looked grim, but they weren't damaged. David cleaned off the road dirt, rinsed the wound with tetracycline in saline, then gently prodded the bowels back into the abdominal cavity and began suturing the gash closed.

"What happened to her?" Bettina asked.

"She got run over," David snapped. "What does it look like?"

"That's my point," Bettina said calmly, unruffled. "Look at these lesions. No car did this."

David glanced up from his stitching for a moment and paused. She was right. The pit bull's shoulders and throat were criss-crossed with puncture wounds, dozens of them.

"How deep?" he asked.

"Two to three centimeters. They're obviously bites, David, but look at the span between the canines. Something very big did this. And why so many? I've seen dogs that have been torn up in fights. I've never seen anything like this."

"I've seen it once," David said grimly. "In my last year of vet school at Michigan State. The state police busted a dogfighting ring south of Saginaw. Arrested over a hundred people, seized three dozen dogs, picked up nearly sixty grand in illegal bets. Most of the dogs were pits or Staffordshires, a few Rottweilers. Some of the ones who'd fought in the ring looked like this one. Or worse. We had to destroy most of them."

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"Destroy them? Why?"

"It wouldn't have been safe to place them with families. Pit bulls as a breed aren't much more aggressive than any other, but dogs that have been blooded in the arena are like loaded guns afterward. They may seem docile, even friendly. Until some kid accidentally pokes Fido in the eye or something else trips his trigger. And then they're instant fighting machines, all reflexes and fangs and jaws and no compunctions about chewing people up. They've been bred for battle, and they're pretty damned good at it. Personally, I think people ought to be licensed to own them, the same way you need a license for pistols or a powerboat."

"Hey!" somebody yelled from the waiting room.

"Be with you in a minute," Bettina called. "We've had an emergency."

"How many people are waiting?" David asked.

"Not as many as there were when you came charging in with this godawful piece of meat. There's still a trail of blood—"

"Hey!"

"Go ahead, pacify the natives," David said. "I'll be finished here in a few minutes."

David was neatly tying off the final stitch in a shallow gash in the pit's shoulder when the dog's eyes blinked open. He knew she was still unconscious, the anesthetic machine was still pumping a mix of nitrous oxide and halothane into her lungs, but somehow her eyes seemed alert, as though she was aware of what was happening. David gently touched her bloodied brow a moment, and her eyes closed again.

"David?" Bettina said, sticking her head around the corner of the door, "I think you'd better step out here. A *gentleman,* and I use the term loosely, claims we have his dog here. A pit bull bitch? I suggested he come back later, but he's quite insistent."

"No problem. Why don't you take over here. Give her oxygen for a few minutes, then room air. I'd like to meet the gentleman who owns this particular lady, anyway. What's he look like?"

"Tall. You'll have no trouble spotting him," Bettina said drily. "Trust me."

David stepped through to the waiting room counter. And stopped dead. The man at the counter towered over him. David was five eleven, but the Viking type facing him was nearly a foot taller, maybe more, dressed in faded work clothes. He was forty-ish, with thinning sandy hair and gray eyes. His long narrow face had been permanently reddened by the wind, but even more strik-

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ing were his scars. His face was marked with three deep vertical gashes, livid as war paint. Love bites. From having a chainsaw blade buck back into his face. A savage, ugly mark. And not all that uncommon in this part of the state.

"You the doc?" His voice was gravel, and David could smell whiskey from across the counter.

"I'm Dr. Westbrook," David acknowledged. "And you are . . . ?"

"Kaipainen," he grunted. "People call me Ox. Somebody seen you pickin' up my dog. A brindle pit bull bitch? You got her?"

"I found a dog by the side of the road. She's in pretty bad shape."

"So you just brung her in, fixed her up, and now I suppose I owe you a whole lotta money, right? Pretty slick. You had no right to take my dog."

"Maybe not," David admitted. "But right now I'm more interested in how she got into the condition she's in."

"What condition? I thought she got hit by a car."

"She was hit, all right. But she's also been chewed up. As bad as I've ever seen. What do you use this dog for, Mr. . . . Ox?"

"Use her for? She's my dog, that's all. She tracks some, looks out for my place when I'm workin'. What the hell business is that of yours?"

"I'm making it my business. She's been badly mauled. I think she's been fighting."

"Yah, well, she runs loose a lot, in the swamp. Maybe she tangled with a boar coon or somethin'. Or when she got hit—"

"No. Her injuries weren't caused by a car, or any animal she'd likely meet in the swamp. What happened to her?"

"How the hell do I know? She got loose, is all. Look, it won't do you no good to try to hold me up, Doc, I ain't got no money. So just gimme my dog and I'll get outa here."

"I'm afraid not. Not today. She can't be moved yet."

"Dammit, she's my dog and I'm takin' her."

"You try to move her now and she'll be dead before you get her to your car."

"Ain't got no car. I'll carry her careful—"

"Forget it," David said flatly. "You're not taking her. For one thing, I don't know that she actually *is* your dog."

"I just told you she was."

"Sorry, but that's not good enough. I'll have to see some proof. Why don't you come back when you're sober and we'll talk about whose dog she is. And what happened to her."

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"Look, you little wimp, I don't wanna hurt you, but I ain't lettin' nobody steal my dog. You'd best step aside. . . ."

A police car roared into the clinic parking lot, lights flashing, and pulled up in front. The effect on Kaipainen was instantaneous. He seemed to shrink before David's eyes. The drunken rage faded like mist, and he was blinking and swallowing like a child who knows he's going to be beaten. He backed away from the counter, looked around the waiting room, then carefully sat down in one of the plastic chairs. And folded his huge hands in his lap.

Sheriff Stan Wolinski sauntered in, square as a block of concrete in his gray summer uniform. He glanced at Kaipainen, then nodded to the only patron who hadn't already fled, a tiny, silver-haired sparrow of a woman in a flowered dress, holding her cat.

"Miz Hitchworth." Wolinski nodded, touching the brim of his uniform cap. "You causin' trouble again?"

"I certainly am not!" she snapped. "Mr. Kaipainen came stomping in here yelling, and he's been drinking—"

"Yes, ma'am," Wolinski said, cutting her off with a smile. "I imagine he has. Doc, you and Ox got some kind of problem here?"

"I'm . . . not sure," David said, eyeing the subdued giant, who was all but cowering in the chair. "I picked up an injured dog by the road this morning and did surgery on her. Mr. Kaipainen here claims the dog is his—"

"She is my dog," Ox interjected. "Ask anybody."

"Okay, Ox," Wolinski said mildly. "Chill out, I'll take care of things. So, Ox owes you a big bill, does he, Doc?"

"I'd like to be paid, of course," David said evenly, "but that's not the point. The dog will die if she's moved now."

"But if she's his dog, that's his lookout, isn't it?"

"I don't know that she's his dog. And under the circumstances, I'm not going to release her today. To Mr. Kaipainen or anyone else."

Wolinski eyed him a moment, then shrugged and turned to face Kaipainen. "How you been, Ox? Haven't seen you around lately."

"I been workin' over to Oscoda at the pallet plant there. Stackin' and cleanin' up."

"Kind of a long walk, isn't it?"

"I hitch. Most days I get rides. I never hitchhike on ten, though. I know that ain't legal."

"That's right," Wolinski said. "It's not. Tell you what, Ox, why don't you go home now, let me sort this thing out for you."

"But he's got my dog—"

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"I know, and I promise you'll get her back. When she's better, I'll have the doc here deliver her personally so you won't have to walk back to town. That sound fair?"

"I don't know, Stan," Kaipainen said, swallowing. "She's all I got—"

"Look, Ox," Wolinski said, kneeling beside the Viking's chair, "do you remember Yvonne LeClair, the girl I used to go with back in high school?"

"Yeah, I remember Yvonne."

"Well, the doc here, he moved up here from Lansing a few years back, and, well, he and Yvonne got married. So you see, I'm not a big fan of his, you understand? And I won't let him do you wrong, Ox. You just trust me, okay? You go on home now." He rose and dusted off his knee. Kaipainen rose too, towering over Wolinski, and then stalked out without a word.

"My God, Stan," David marveled. "He's absolutely terrified of you. What on earth did you ever do to him?"

"Put him in jail once," Wolinski said simply. "Picked him up drunk, tossed him in the tank. He about went crazy in there. Tore the place up, tore himself up. I should have known better than to lock him in. So now he's afraid of me. And it's not something I'm proud of. Which is why you really are going to deliver his dog to him as soon as possible."

"No," David said. "It's not that simple."

"Look, Doc, if you're worried about your bill, Ox hasn't got doodley squat anyway. There's no point in trying to hold him up."

"It's not about the money. His dog's been ripped from one end to the other. I think she's been fighting. In a ring."

"Dogfighting, you mean? Are you sure?"

"The only time I've ever seen dogs chewed up the way this one was, they'd been fought."

"I don't know," Wolinski said doubtfully. "Ox lives out in the middle of noplace and I know that dog runs loose. Maybe she tangled with a coon or a bobcat—"

"No, from the bite patterns it was definitely another dog. A big one. You see, when dogs mix it up, they don't normally fight to the death. They battle long enough to decide who's stronger and then the loser lights out, end of story. Pit bulls are different, of course, because they were bred for fighting, but if they're losing—and believe me, this dog lost big-time—they'll still run as a last resort. Unless they're somewhere where they can't get away. Like in a ring, for instance."

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"I can't see it, Doc. For one thing, I haven't heard a thing about a dog ring. I'm not saying we've got a crime-free county. Two bikers from Pontiac are runnin' a crank lab over on the west end somewhere, some locals grow reefer in the state forest, and a few cars have disappeared from the village. Hell, some kids even broke into my toolshed. But it's all small stuff. A dogfighting ring would involve a lot of people and a lot of money. There's no way I wouldn't hear about it. But even if there was one, Ox wouldn't be involved."

"Why not?"

"Hell, you met him. He's not your average social butterfly. He didn't mix with folks much before he bounced that saw off his face, avoids 'em altogether now. Doesn't drive. Can't read, for that matter. Lives alone out on Elkhart Road, traps some, probably poaches, works when he needs money for things he can't barter pelts for. He's just not the organized-crime type, you know? Now, if you told me Ox was fightin' people for money, I might buy that. But his dog? Nah. Not likely."

"Then why does he have a pit bull?"

"As I recall, he found her runnin' loose a few years back. She was just a stray. Like him. Tell you what; I'll make a deal with you. I promise I'll keep a sharp lookout for any sign of your dogfighting ring, okay? But meanwhile, since a man's still innocent until proven guilty in this county, you give Ox his dog back as soon as she's fit to travel. Fair enough?"

"I guess," David said.

"Good. Oh, and Doc? The next time you see a road-killed dog? Do me a favor and just let it be, okay? Ox Kaipainen thinks the world of that dog and he's nobody to mess with. For your sake, I surely do hope she makes a good recovery. And a quick one."

"Yeah." David nodded. "So do I."

And she did. Incredibly, when David checked on the dog a few hours after the anesthetic wore off, the bowlegged little bruiser was on her feet in the cage. She was weaving, and swathed in enough bandages to pass for a mummy's pup, but she was up. And from the fire in her eyes, she was game for a rematch with any and all comers. Bring 'em on.

David pulled a chair up beside her cage and talked to her for a full ten minutes before he even considered opening the cage door to check her wounds. No point in pushing his luck. The lady was no more sociable than her master, and David's arm still ached

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where she'd latched onto him. Over the next few days, she gentled down enough to tolerate his attentions, though she never really warmed to him. Still, they achieved an acceptable level of co-existence, civil, if not friendly. The only problem was, Kaipainen hadn't mentioned the dog's name, and it wasn't on her collar. So David called her Roadkill.

By the end of the following week, he could no longer justify keeping the dog on medical grounds. She was still moving stiffly due to the contusions on her shoulder where she was struck, but the gashes in her back and belly were closed, with no sign of infection.

So he swallowed his misgivings, loaded Roadkill into a travel cage in the back of his Jeep, and followed the crude map Bettina jotted for him. Elkhart Road trailed off into the bottomlands east of Algoma, low swampy ground, not good for much but ducks, frogs, and muskrats.

And poachers. When David pulled into the overgrown yard near Kaipainen's small cabin, Ox was dressing out a dead deer. The buck was hanging from a branch of a large pine, spread-eagled and eviscerated. Ox was peeling off its hide, rolling the skin down from an incision in the animal's throat. He straightened slowly, still holding the skinning knife, as David climbed out of the Jeep.

"Doc," Ox said, nodding. "Wasn't expecting you."

"I can see that," David said. "That buck's out of season, Mr. Kaipainen. Suppose I'd been the law?"

"What if you was? I found this one dead in the road. Musta been kilt by a truck."

"Not unless the truck shot it behind the ear with a small-caliber weapon. I can see the bullet hole from here."

Ox glanced at the deer, then back at David. "Maybe you can. Look, Stan don't care much if a man takes meat illegal, if it's just to feed himself or his own. Long as he don't get to sellin' it, you know? You gonna rat me out to the D.N.R.?"

"What you eat and how you get it is your business, Mr. Kaipainen, I just came to bring your dog back."

"She okay?"

"She's doing very well, considering," David said, opening the cage door and carefully lifting Roadkill out. The dog limped directly to Ox, then sat obediently at his feet. The giant knelt slowly beside her and let her lick the blood off his hands. When he glanced up at David his eyes were swimming.

"She looks good," he rasped, swallowing. "I thought she might

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be, you know, scarred." He gestured toward his own face with the skinning knife.

"No," David said. "She's got a remarkable constitution. I doubt the scars will show at all in a year or so. Maybe a line on her belly where her fur is thin. No more than that. You'll need to change her bandages. I'll show you how to do that and give you some antibiotic ointment for her."

"No," Ox said, "I don't think I can do that."

"Do what? Change her bandages? Why not? You obviously don't go woozy at the sight of blood."

"It ain't that. Look, when I seen you that day in your office, I thought you was . . ."

"Trying to rip you off?"

"Somethin' like that, I guess. But I've talked to a few guys around town about you. They say you're okay, pretty much straight up. That you pick up stray animals sometimes, just to help 'em if you can. Somebody told me you even got a three-legged cat with one eye."

"That's right. Her name's Franken Kat."

"What the hell good is a three-legged cat?"

"She's a fair mouser. Can't catch anything, but they take one look at her and decide to change area codes."

"But why do you still have her? Didn't her owner want her back lookin' like she does?"

"Actually, we never found her owner, so I kept her. Why?"

"See, that's the thing. I ain't sure I can take Pekka back."

"What did you call her?"

Kaipainen repeated the name, but David still couldn't make sense of it. "Are you saying that in English?"

"Nah, it's Finn. Like me. So, how much do I owe you for fixin' her up?"

"I'm not sure you owe me anything, Mr. Kaipainen."

"Ox. My front name's Osmo, but people just call me Ox. Kinda fits me, you know?"

"Okay, Ox, the way I see it, you didn't bring your dog to me and you didn't authorize any treatment. I did it on my own. So, technically speaking, you don't owe me a dime."

"That ain't right. Hell, look at her. If you hadn't sewed her up she woulda died. But . . . see, I ain't got much. I don't own this place, don't even know who does. I'm on my own, you know? Free. Always have been. But I don't take no charity. And if I take her back without payin' you nothin', that's what it'd be."

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"Wait a minute, are you saying you don't want her back?"

"It ain't that I don't want her. I just can't take her like this."

"Fine, then I'll take her," David said. "She's mine, right?"

Ox nodded, frowning.

"Good. I like this dog a lot. Unfortunately, I've got a three-legged cat, and strange animals coming in and out of the clinic all day. I think she'd be better off with room to run. Someplace in the country, maybe. Like . . . here. Mr. Kaipainen, I wonder if you could help me out by taking a stray dog off my hands. Not charity, you understand. You'd be doing me a big favor. She needs care, though. Maybe you ought to think about it."

Ox eyed him a moment, reading him. He shook his massive head slowly. "That's the other thing people said about you. That you're more'n a little crazy. Okay, Doc, you put it that way, I guess I can make room for a stray dog around here. Why don't you show me about her bandages?"

David knelt beside Roadkill and untaped the corners of the oily gauze draped over her shoulders. Ox winced at the savage tapestry of bite marks.

"Whoa," he said softly, "no wonder you thought I mighta been fightin' her. This is real ugly."

"The sheriff thought she might have tangled with a raccoon," David offered.

"Naw, no coon did this. Dogs. Big 'uns. Wolf size, I'd say."

"You think it might have been a wolf?"

"Ain't been no wolves in this part of the state for sixty years, Doc. 'Sides, the space between the front teeth . . . Where did you find her?"

"On State Road, just east of town. There are no farms nearby that have big dogs that I know of."

"Ain't nothin' around there," Ox acknowledged, massaging Roadkill's brow with his massive thumb. "Nothin' but state land around there, mostly swamp . . ." His voice trailed off.

"What is it?"

"Nothin'," Ox said. "Just thinkin'. How often do I change the bandages?"

"Actually, she's healing so quickly I think you can leave her shoulders uncovered now. Just apply the ointment once a day, and don't let her get too active. She's still stitched together like a rag doll. I'll stop by in a week or so to take her stitches out."

"Naw, no need for you to come all the way out here. You've gone to trouble enough. I'll bring her by your office," Ox said absently.

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"Tell you what, why don't you give me a bill. Write down how much I owe you."

"There's no need for that, I've already—"

"Just do it, okay? It don't have to be official, you know, with everything listed. Make it like a IOU. Use that little pad you got in your pocket there. And one other thing. Can you tell me where you found her? Exactly, I mean?"

David hesitated. There was an odd light in Kaipainen's eyes, an angry intensity. "Yes," he said at last, "I think so."

But Ox didn't bring Roadkill back. Two days later, as David was closing his office, Stan Wolinski stalked into the waiting room carrying a small plastic bag. He laid it carefully on the counter. "You recognize this, Doc?"

David swiveled the bag to read the single scrap of paper it held. "It's a bill," he said. "I gave it to Ox Kaipainen a few days ago."

"When, exactly?"

"Wednesday afternoon. Why?"

"Five hundred and seventy bucks? A little steep, isn't it?"

"Actually, it's low, but it doesn't matter. I never expected to see a dime of it anyway. How did you get it?"

"If you didn't expect to collect, why did you give it to him?"

"He asked me to. Look, what's—?"

"He asked you?" Wolinski echoed, not bothering to conceal his disbelief. "For a bill? Why would he do that?"

"How the hell do I know? In case you haven't noticed, the gentleman's a couple of sandwiches shy of a picnic. I took the dog out to him but he said he couldn't take her back. Didn't want to be obligated."

"So you gave him a bill?"

"No, I gave him the dog. She was his, and just looking around that place I knew he couldn't afford fifty bucks, to say nothing of five hundred. But as I was leaving, he asked me to write him a bill, so I did."

"A bill he couldn't pay."

"Lots of my clients can't pay their bills, especially the ones I pick up by the side of the road. It's no big deal. So what's the problem? Is Ox in some kind of trouble over this bill?"

"I don't know," Wolinski said. "Did you make any threats when you gave it to him? Like maybe you'd take his dog back if he didn't pay? Anything like that?"

"Threaten Ox? Are you nuts? He had a . . ." David hesitated.

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"Had what? What were you going to say?"

"Nothing. Not until you tell me what this is all about."

"Look, Doc, you don't make the rules, I do. And I'm telling you to finish what you were going to say."

"Sorry. Not without a lawyer present."

"A lawyer? Why would you think you need a lawyer?"

"I don't know, but it always works on TV when people don't want to answer questions. So how about it? What's going on?"

"Nothing," Wolinski sighed. "It's over. Ox Kaipainen's dead. Suicide, looks like."

"Suicide? But . . . I don't understand. Why?"

"Who knows why anybody does a thing like that. He didn't leave a note; couldn't write. God knows, Ox wasn't wrapped any too tight."

"How did it happen?"

"Buddy of his found him in his cabin. Looks like he shot himself in the head. Weapon was in his hand, a .22 Colt Woodsman, long barrel. Poachers favor 'em. Real accurate. Especially when you're shooting at yourself. So, what were you going to say about Ox?"

"It doesn't matter now. He was skinning out a deer when I dropped off his dog and he had a bloody knife in his hand. Under the circumstances, I didn't make any heavy threats about a bill I didn't expect him to pay anyway."

"Maybe you didn't expect him to pay it, but I wonder how he felt about it? He'd always been on his own, you know? Maybe he shouldn't have been. When he drank, he could be a real handful. I've scuffled with him more'n once over the years. But he wasn't mean, really. Mostly he kept to himself, livin' off the land like a . . . natural man, I guess. Maybe the idea of owing an unpayable debt was more than he could handle."

Wolinski picked up the plastic evidence bag. "Who knows what a guy like that was thinking? Growin' up around here, I knew a lot of guys like Ox. Woodsmen. Cedar savages, we called 'em. Not many left, anymore. And now, one less and it's a damned shame. I've got his dog in the car. Do you want her or should I take her to the pound?"

"No, I'll take her, for now anyway. She still needs some care."

"You sure?" Wolinski said sourly. "There's nobody to bill anymore, you know."

"She was road-kill when I found her, remember? I guess she definitely is now."

After Wolinski left, David led Roadkill into the clinic, put her up

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on the table, and removed most of her sutures. She offered no resistance. Twitched a time or two when a stitch pulled coming out, but didn't growl at him or even glare. The dog seemed as numbed by what had happened as David felt. Or perhaps generations of fighting to the death in pits as a diversion for subhumans unfit to share the same planet with her had made her skin less sensitive. If not her heart.

As he worked on the dog, snipping the Braunamid sutures and carefully threading them out of the wounds with tweezers, his thoughts kept returning to Ox, and their last conversation. Had the big man given him some hint of what he felt or what he'd planned? Had he missed it? Overlooked it because Ox didn't seem much brighter than some of the animals David treated. . . .

No. It just wouldn't compute. Kaipainen hadn't seemed at all depressed. Quite the opposite, in fact. It wasn't so much what he said as the look in his eyes.

After Ox had examined the bite wounds on Roadkill's shoulders, he'd said . . . that they were wolf size. But there weren't any wolves in this part of the state. Hadn't been for sixty years. And then he'd asked David for a bill. . . . But, damn it, he hadn't seemed upset about it. It was almost as if he'd thought of a way to pay it. But that made no sense either. He'd only looked at the bite marks, then insisted on getting a bill. And then he'd asked David exactly where he'd found Roadkill. It made no sense at all.

David applied fresh ointment to the wounds and decided to leave the stitches in the deep gash in her belly for a few more days. He set the dog on the floor, then fumbled through his office junk drawer and came up with a county map. He traced State Road east of Algoma with his fingertip. He'd found her right about . . . there. Roughly six miles from the village. Kaipainen's cabin was probably a mile or so south of the spot where Roadkill was struck, with a farm and some small holdings in between.

David knew the farm, a small dairy operation owned by an old-timer named Jase Papineau. He'd inoculated his cows, and once he'd handled a difficult calving there. Jase had a pair of Border collies, but they couldn't have caused the wounds on Roadkill. She'd have eaten them for lunch. Besides, Jase was salt of the earth. No reason to think anything was out of line there.

The small holdings were forty- and sixty-acre patches of unimproved hunting land. No one lived on them and since they bordered Kaipainen's place, he would have been familiar with them. Hell, he probably poached on them.

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So why would he think he could pay his bill if he knew where Roadkill had been struck? David frowned at the map. State Road was a four-lane highway and the dog was hit on the side farthest from Kaipainen's place. The north side. So perhaps she'd been crossing it coming back from somewhere. But there was nothing north of the road. Sixty-thousand acres of state forest. Had Roadkill been ranging in there? And tangled with . . . What?

It didn't add up. David decided to call it a night. He locked up the clinic, lifted Roadkill into the Jeep's passenger seat, and headed home. It was after six, but thanks to the wonders of daylight savings time, the sun was still well above the hills west of Algoma, painting the farm buildings and forested bluffs of the rural countryside with purple shadows.

State Road was a river of steel, jammed with commuters. David settled into the right lane, musing as he drove.

Roughly halfway home he passed the spot where he'd rescued Roadkill. He pulled off the road, waited for a break in the traffic, then gunned the Jeep across the four-lane in an illegal U-turn and parked on the shoulder of the road, guessing at the exact spot.

He scanned the area. There was nothing unusual about it. To the north, rolling, timbered bottomlands, mostly swamp. You'd need a tank to get through it. But Ox had definitely been curious about this spot, so . . . As David climbed out of the Jeep, Roadkill vaulted past him across the seat and took off trotting in her lame, herky-jerky gait directly into the swamp.

"Roadkill!" She didn't even slow. Hell, why should she? It wasn't her name. Damn! He sprinted after her but she disappeared into the woods before he could run her down.

The brush at the edge of the wooded tangle was literally a wall of poplars and jack pines interspersed with tag alders, a trash tree that thrived in the sodden ground. David thrashed through the tangle of brush and ground cover into a more open area. He glimpsed Roadkill off to his right, moving at a steady, uneven trot. He slogged after her. His shoes were already soaked, but at least the water was down this time of year, no more than ankle deep most places. The tricky part was just staying on his feet over the uneven ground.

And keeping the dog in sight. She was setting a good pace, but he was sure she'd fade quickly. The only question was whether her stamina would give out before she'd torn open her stitches. Damn it! What the hell did she think — He tripped over a hummock and went down hard, face first into a stand of alders.

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He rose to his knees, slightly dazed, and looked around. He was all right, a scrape along his cheek. No problem. Lucky he'd fallen where he had. There was a sharpened stake only inches . . . No, it wasn't a stake, just a sapling, severed near the base by a machete or an axe. As he glanced around he noticed other signs that someone had been through here before, carving a rude, barely visible path. Or at least one barely visible to people. To a dog, it probably looked like a forest freeway.

There was a familiar rusty stain on a clump of grass beside him. He tested it with his fingertips and they came away with a powdery residue. Dried blood. There were dribs and drabs of it on the grass all along the path. Roadkill must have come out this way after she'd been chewed up. And now she was following her own blood trail back to . . . whatever.

But she hadn't cut this crude path out. Someone else had. Ox? Maybe. A woodsman who could kill a deer with a .22 pistol could certainly follow a blood trail as well marked as this one.

David glanced at his watch as he rose stiffly to his feet. Nearly seven. Two hours of daylight, less than that in the deep woods where the sunlight dies early. He had to find the dog, and soon, or they'd both be lost in here, and the idea of a night in the swamps with something that could chew up a full-grown pit bull like an hors d'oeuvre had no appeal at all.

He plunged after the dog, moving more cautiously now, wary of his footing. He couldn't hope to outrun her in here, but her strength would have to fade soon.

Or maybe not. He'd plodded on a good half-hour without catching sight of Roadkill again. At least the going was getting easier. The ground had been slowly rising as he marched, fewer holes and hummocks, higher and drier. And then he came to the reason why. A slow-moving creek meandered out of the woods. It didn't look deep, probably no more than chest high on a man, but it was ten or twelve feet wide. Roadkill had apparently just plunged in and paddled across. He could see her muddy tracks on the far bank. David spotted a fallen tree roughly forty yards to the east. He detoured down to it, clambered across the stream on it, then worked his way back to the trail.

Walking was almost pleasant now. The trees were taller and more widely spaced. Mature poplars and spruce shaded out the sun and thinned the ground cover beneath their canopy. There were even clearings, or would have been if they hadn't been

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clogged with head-high alders and ferns and reeds. . . . And then he found Roadkill.

She was sitting on a hummock at the edge of a clearing, her sides heaving, tongue lolling, utterly exhausted. He talked to her gently as he approached her, but she made no move to run. She'd gone as far as she could, and then stopped, out of gas.

He knelt beside her, ran his hands over her flanks, and checked her stitches. Still solid. She'd pulled a couple of gashes open on her shoulders, but not all the way. They'd probably close again on their own. No major damage done. Thank God for small favors.

He rose slowly and took stock of his situation. The sun was nearing treetop level on the horizon. They still had an hour or so of daylight to find their way back. The path was clear enough at this point, as though . . . it had been heavily used. As he scanned his surroundings, David realized that the grass around him had been trampled, ferns broken, in a rough circle. And the whole area was spattered with rust spots. Dried blood.

Sweet Jesus, this was where it had happened. Roadkill hadn't stopped here because she was spent, she'd stopped because she'd arrived at her destination. She'd been here before, had fought here, and now her savage heart had brought her back for a rematch. She was resting, waiting for her opponent to show again.

But why here? There were no rocks or deadfalls in the area where a wolf could fort up, it was just a clearing, with tag alders and ferns and . . . reefer. In the mix of foliage ahead, every third plant was marijuana, mature plants with the telltale erose leaves and stalks as tall as a man. This was no whimsical patch seeded by some happy-go-lucky pothead, it was a serious growing operation, carefully camouflaged in the depths of the state forest. There were easily sixty to seventy plants in the clearing, possibly more, and God only knew how many more clearings like this one there were concealed back here. And for all David knew, they could have tigers guarding this place.

Time to go. He reached down for Roadkill, but she stiffened and growled. But the warning snarl wasn't for him. She was staring at something on the far side of the clearing. And then David saw it too. The ferns were moving. Something big was coming toward them. Moving fast.

Roadkill staggered to her feet to face the threat but David wasn't waiting. He scooped up the dog and ran, sprinting back down the path as fast as he could manage. Which wasn't very. Between Roadkill's sixty pounds and the brush snagging his

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clothes, the best he could manage was a reeling stagger. Still, he was covering ground. He could hear shouting behind him, and a raspy wasp-buzz as something whistled past his head and thwacked into a tree beside the trail. A bullet? No, there'd been no shot. . . . Pellet gun. Like the one he used to inject aggressive bulls or elk. Not a boy's BB gun; a serious, high-pressure air rifle. Lethal if they struck a man. And they fired .22-caliber pellets. The same size as the slug that had killed Ox.

The voices grew fainter, and for a minute David thought they might be giving up. But then Roadkill started growling and squirming in his arms, as though she sensed a danger he couldn't see. He risked a glance over his shoulder, and caught a glimpse of them. Rottweilers. Two of them, about sixty yards behind him, coming on hard and fast. A hundred and forty pounds apiece, hurtling through the brush like black and tan demons. Silently. No barking. They'd been well trained.

Seconds. That's all he had now. If they caught him, he was done. He had no illusions about fighting off a pair of trained attack dogs. If he dropped Roadkill, he might be able to make it up a tree in the confusion. Because she'd fight them, injured or not. She'd die fighting them. And he couldn't let that happen. He only had one ghost of a chance . . . So he kept on running, desperately wrestling with the fiery little bull who wanted nothing more than to break free and give battle.

And then they hit it. David broke out of the brush at the creek. He didn't hesitate. He threw Roadkill in the general direction of the far bank and plunged in after her. He found his footing in the middle of the creek, then turned to face his attackers. And not a moment too soon. The first Rott hurtled out of the trees like a missile and leapt at David's head, all fangs and snarling fury.

As the dog pounced, David dropped to his knees below the surface of the water, clawing desperately for purchase as the dog came down on him. He grabbed a foreleg and pulled it under. The Rottweiler thrashed, snapping at him, but only for a second. It got a lungful of water and instantly forgot its attack, forgot everything but frantically trying to fight its way to the surface for air. He let it go, and burst out of the water himself, just in time to take the full force of the second Rott's attack.

The dog struck him shoulder high, knocking him off his feet. It whirled on him, churning the water to foam as it clawed furiously toward him. And then its eyes widened, and it spun back to its rear as Roadkill clamped onto its hindquarters with her iron jaws.

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David grabbed a fistful of the Rott's pelt at the shoulder and thrust him under with Roadkill still clamped on his rear end. The water had the same effect on both dogs. They struggled to the surface gagging and gasping for air. David pushed the Rott away from him toward the opposite shore where its companion was still trying to claw its way up the bank. He grabbed Roadkill, clambered out of the water, and staggered off down the trail.

Behind him, he could hear the Rotts hacking and gagging as they coughed up a fair amount of creek water. Great dogs, Rottweilers. Loyal, intelligent, and no more aggressive than they're trained to be. But they can't hold their breath underwater. Only a very few retrievers can manage that particular trick. The two attack dogs were done, for the moment. And apparently their masters had counted on them to finish the job. David could hear no other sounds of pursuit.

The rest of the run was a nightmare, reeling through the woods in the gathering dusk, desperately trying to stay on the path and hold the dog struggling in his arms. Somewhere along the run, Roadkill settled down, panting with exhaustion. David knew exactly how she felt. He wasn't far from collapse himself. The sunlight was rapidly waning and he knew if they didn't get clear of the woods before dark, they'd never get out at all.

But somehow they did. As the light gradually faded into shadows, it took every ounce of his stamina and concentration to keep putting one foot ahead of the other and to stay on the crude trace of a path. So that when he suddenly broke through a tangle of brush and found himself standing on the edge of the highway only a dozen yards from his Jeep and the steady stream of traffic beyond it, he was stunned.

He sank slowly to his knees, gasping, exhausted. Only Roadkill's squirming to get free kept him from passing out altogether. If he let her go, she could die in traffic in a heartbeat. So he struggled to hold on to her, and to his consciousness. And realized they were coming for him.

A pickup truck pulled out of a forest trail a half-mile back down the road and began rumbling toward him along the shoulder with its lights out.

Christ, no wonder they hadn't followed him. They didn't have to! They knew where the damned path came out. They just took some back road out, found his Jeep, and waited for him to show up!

David lunged to his feet and staggered toward the Jeep. The

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pickup was gaining speed now, the passenger window was down and he could see the muzzle of the pellet rifle centering on him.

He ducked around the Jeep and yanked open the driver's door. A slug ricocheted off the roll bar only inches from his head. He tossed Roadkill onto the passenger's seat, vaulted behind the wheel, and fired up the Jeep. The truck was almost on him, veering up on the edge of the freeway to come alongside for a point-blank shot. No time to run for it.

He jammed the gearshift into reverse and floored the accelerator. The Jeep backed into the pickup, striking it just ahead of the passenger door. The impact spun the Jeep around, nearly upending it. The pickup caromed off and skidded out onto the highway. David caught only a glimpse of a bearded face in the window before a flatbed truck loaded with steel beams slammed into the pickup cab at seventy miles an hour and rolled over it, crushing the truck beneath it and dragging it along in a maelstrom of sparks and rending metal that howled like the end of the world.

David glanced up when the patrol car pulled into the clinic lot, but didn't bother to answer the door. The blinds were drawn and the Closed sign was in place. Stan Wolinski came in anyway.

"Doc?"

"I'm back here."

Wolinski strolled through to the operating room. David had Roadkill up on the table, swabbing out the gashes that had reopened on her shoulders.

"How's she doin'?" Wolinski asked.

"Better than I am," David said, fingering the rubber neck brace they'd given him in the emergency room. "This dog's got the damnedest constitution I've ever seen. I don't think you could kill her with an H-bomb."

"You look a little rough, though," Wolinski agreed. "The guy drivin' that flatbed got off with only bruises. The pair in the pickup are both dead. Real dead. It took the fire department nearly an hour just to cut their bodies out of the wreck. I've seen possums flattened in truck-stop driveways that looked better."

"Who were they?"

"Couple of gang bangers from Detroit. Survivalist types. Figured they were gonna finance their new world order by growin' reefer up here in the great outdoors. You were right about that gun they were usin'. It was an air rifle, a Shamal, .22 caliber. I got a feeling

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when the medical examiner does the autopsy on Ox, he'll find the slug in him was from their gun, not his own."

"They fired at me without hesitating," David said. "They probably did the same thing when he showed up at their patch. Then hauled his body back to his place and arranged things to look like suicide. I feel partly responsible, though. If I hadn't given Ox that damned bill, he wouldn't have backtracked his dog—"

"You don't know that," Wolinski said, cutting him off. "Ox roamed all through that swamp, poaching. He'd probably've come across them eventually. Or someone else would have. Those guys were ex-cons with a long record of violence. They were an accident waiting to happen. And, God bless him, maybe Ox was, too."

"Maybe he was," David conceded. "It still bothers me, though."

"A lot of things seem to bother you, Doc. So what are you going to do about the dog?"

"Actually, I was hoping you could help me out with her."

"Me?"

"Sure. Pit bulls are terrific dogs, but they're not your average mom-and-pop house pet. They're more like . . . power tools, or even weapons. They're great to have around, as long as you treat 'em with respect. They've been bred for tenacity and fighting spirit for centuries, and that heritage doesn't evaporate just because you teach the dog to sit up or fetch your slippers."

"Granted, but what's that got to do with me?"

"For one thing, you're a man who's used to treating weapons with respect. And didn't you mention that you'd had trouble with vandals on your place? I guarantee this lady would put an end to that. Besides, if it wasn't for her, those two loonies would still be on the loose. I figure you owe her one."

The sheriff eyed the dog on the table doubtfully. She returned his stare, unintimidated. "What's her name?"

"I'm not sure," David admitted. "Ox mentioned it, but it was in Finnish and I didn't understand. I've been calling her Roadkill."

"What the hell kind of name is that?"

"An appropriate one," David said. "If you take her, you can name her anything you like."

"No, I don't think so," Stan said. "The name kind of suits her if you think about it. It'll do, I guess. Roadkill."

The dog cocked her head slightly, as though she was trying to understand what Stan was saying.

"Roadkill," Stan repeated. And this time her tail twitched. It was only a twitch, definitely not a wag. But it was a start. ●

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1995 READERS AWARD

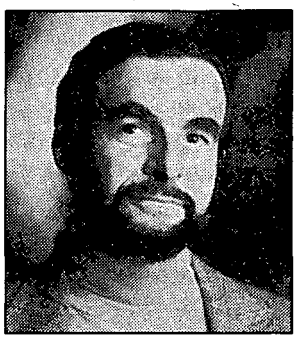

Photo by Peter Papadopoulous

Doug Allyn

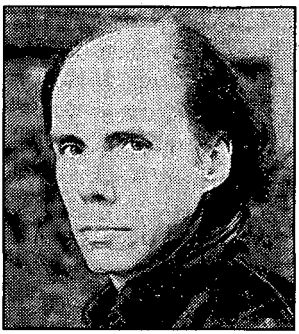

Photo by Jerry Bauer

Jeffery Deaver

Snow in the Northeast slowed receipt of the Readers Award ballots this year, leaving our staff in spine-tingling suspense as to the outcome. Adding to the excitement of each new piece of mail was the closeness of the race, with front runners Doug Allyn and Jeffery Deaver seeming to change places every day. Finally, when the delivery date for our announcement issue could be postponed no longer, the last eligible vote declared the pair tied. We therefore award first place to them both.

Doug Allyn needs no introduction to regular *EQMM* readers. With two Readers Awards and several Readers Award scrolls to his credit, he has become a perennial favorite of short-story readers, who voted in large numbers for his Mid-December story "Franken Kat." The Michigan author is also a novelist with two new books in his Mitch Mitchell series (*Icewater Mansions* and *Black Water*) recently published by St. Martin's Press, and a third, *A Dance in Deep Water*, set to follow soon. A rock musician by night, Mr. Allyn has discovered an original way to combine music and fiction. "Serendipity," he tells us, "led me to a genre of minstrelsy known as the murder ballad. Such songs were the precursors of the modern mystery story. The oldest ones I've found so far date back to the 16th century, but the field is still very much alive." — All the more so since Mr. Allyn and his wife, singer Eve Allyn, began performing the ballads this year in local libraries — an example of the inventiveness of one of mystery's most compelling storytellers.

Music and mystery also meet in Jeffery Deaver, a University of Missouri Journalism School graduate who spent six or seven years after graduation working as a busker, folk singer, song writer, and music teacher. It was only after a change of direction took him to law school and

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then to a high-profile law firm in New York City that the musician seriously turned mystery writer. Despite the hectic schedule of his day job, Mr. Deaver began to write thrillers and mysteries, which soon were bringing him strong publishing contracts and led to his retiring from the law to write full-time. With eight published thrillers and two Edgar Allan Poe Award nominations already under his belt, the author saw the publication last fall of *A Maiden's Grave* (Viking), a thriller that has already sold in ten countries and is headed for the big screen with a script by Donald Stuart (screenwriter for *The Hunt for Red October* and *Patriot Games*). Although he always has at least two novels in the works, the Virginia-based author still finds time to write a number of short stories. "Gone Fishing" (October 1995), tied for this year's Readers Award, was his second piece for *EQMM*.

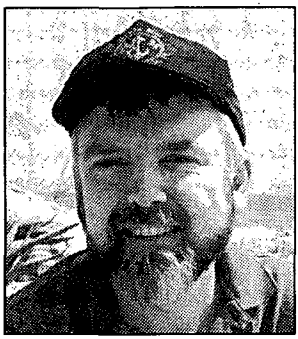

Photo by Michael DuBois

Brendan DuBois

In another close finish, New Hampshirite Brendan DuBois took second place in a race with *EQMM*'s Edward D. Hoch by one slim point — the equivalent of one third-place vote. For Mr. DuBois, the *EQMM* scroll for "Heirlooms" (July 1995) will cap a year of successes in the field. In June of 1995, he was honored at the Eyecon convention with a Shamus Award from the Private Eye Writers of America, and in January his second novel, *Black Tide* (Simon & Schuster/ Pocket Books), was published to rave reviews. A short-story writer with credits in *AHMM* and *Playboy* as well as *EQMM*, the former newspaper reporter belongs to the younger generation of mystery writers, having made his debut in *EQMM* in the late 1980s while still in his twenties.

Photo by Standard Studios

Edward D. Hoch

To the best of our knowledge, no author has ever received more votes than Edward D. Hoch in any year's Readers Award competition. However, this is the first year Mr. Hoch's name appears in our announcement of winners. The reason for this omission is, of course, that votes for the contemporary champion of the short puzzle mystery are inevitably spread among the thirteen stories he writes for *EQMM* each year. Despite the handicap occasioned by his fans having so many choices, this year the author managed to garner enough votes for a single story, "The Killdeer Chronicles"(Mid-December 1995), to claim the long-overdue honor of a Readers Award scroll. Mr. Hoch's short fiction will be celebrated in book form in 1996 with a collection of Dr. Hawthorne stories published by Crippen & Landru Publishers (P.O. Box 9315, Norfolk, VA 23005-9315).

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The Mechanical Woman

by Marlys Millhiser

"Hello," the woman's voice greeted Charlie with a peculiar zeal, "thank you for calling Pacific West National's hotline."

"I'd like to speak to Dorothy—"

"If you would like to call in a deposit, please press one."

Charlie Greene pressed a pink Pepto-Bismol tablet out of its cellophane snuggy. Traffic vibrated the sidewalk under her. Pressing "O" did not get her a central operator.

"If you wish to speak to the Mortgage Department, please press two." Charlie pressed the minty tablet onto her tongue and opened another plastic snuggy. She slid one cramping foot out of its pump and rested the sole against the calf of the other leg.

"If you wish to speak to the Home Equity Department, please press three." Charlie pressed a hand over her other ear as brakes screeched and a fender bent behind her. Her pantyhose and silk shell sweat-glued themselves to her skin under her seersucker blazer and skirt.

"If you are inquiring about the latest interest rates on IRAs, CDs, or money market accounts, please press four." It was one of those public phones on a pole with clear plastic side flaps from the waist up so you could see the approach of an attacker but couldn't conceal an exchange of drugs for money or a metamorphosis into

In her second appearance in an *EQMM* short story, Los Angeles literary agent Charlie Greene may be the star witness to a murder. Greene is a veteran of three book-length amateur-sleuthing adventures, the most recent of which, *Murder in a Hot Flash,* was published by Simon & Schuster in February of 1995. Marlys Millhiser's literary output includes more than a half-dozen other mystery novels. She lives in Boulder, Colorado.

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Superman. Out in the street it looked as if a Mustang convertible had rear-ended a Subaru station wagon and the wagon had plowed into a parked canary-yellow hatchback.

"If you would like information on the current balance of your checking or savings accounts, please press five." The odor of raw gasoline and the bleat of cursing and car horns filled the world.

"If you would like this menu repeated, please press six." A black high-body pickup had stopped and the driver crawled out the passenger's side, Charlie assumed to help extricate the driver from the Subaru. A balding man in glaring white knit shirt and shorts against a Baja tan perched on the convertible's seat back and shouted into his cellular, gesturing his frustration with a raised fist. 911 had probably requested he press a number. Meanwhile, traffic was backing up through the intersection half a block away, and Charlie's cellular was, unfortunately, in her car at All American Car Repair.

"If you need further assistance and wish to hear the next menu, please press seven." The taste of Pepto-Bismol and cucumber revisited Charlie's tongue. She'd had a veggie sandwich at a sidewalk deli where the sign read *Please take a number,* but the harried Arab behind the counter ignored the numbers and took orders from all four men lined up behind Charlie before admitting her existence. It was possible he didn't know much English, because she'd ordered a roast beef sandwich.

The guy from the high-body, which was blocking most of the traffic, was solidly built and well-tanned also. He wore a tan cotton shirt with the first three buttons undone. He was having trouble with the Subaru's door.

"Please press a number," the mechanical woman insisted. Charlie pressed seven. She needed to talk to Dorothy Bramwell, her personal loan advisor, about new developments in her indebtedness due to her car. She didn't "wish" to speak to whomever was on call to answer a pressed number on a "menu." This was the first time Charlie had been forced to get in touch with Dorothy and, damn it, it was Dorothy she'd talk to.

The hunk in the open-necked tan shirt had a full head of hair the color of butterscotch and swept back in a male-model ducktail. He leapt over the Sube's hood, balancing on one hand and wrist, and tried the door on Charlie's side. His pants were a deeper tan. He was a monochrome man. He had a lean, tight butt.

"Thank you for calling Pacific West National's second hotline

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menu." This one was a guy. He sounded less enthusiastic but more patient than his predecessor and he too spoke English. How long would it take to find someone at Pacific West who would speak directly to Charlie Greene?

"If you are inquiring about small-business loans, please press one." Charlie worked at a talent agency on Wilshire in Beverly Hills, Congdon and Morse's only literary agent, and handled screenwriters and book authors for them. But not this morning.

No, this morning Charlie's Toyota had frozen up in ninety-degree weather on an off-ramp, had been towed to ALL AMERICAN CAR REPAIR! where NOBODY, BUT NOBODY! knew better what could be wrong with her Japanese car.

The problem was, nobody spoke English at All American. Or Japanese for that matter. A sweat rivulet trickled down Charlie's cheek and she lifted thick curls off the nape of her neck.

The man in the shorts had given up on the cellular and stood checking his watch and the crumpled grille on his Mustang.

Finally a grinning mechanic with beautiful eyes and grease-smeared hands that kept trying to pat Charlie's seersucker bottom agreed to shepherd the Toyota through the "clinic" there at All American. At least she was pretty sure that was the agreement between her and Julio. He had her business card and she had a claim check with some indecipherable scrawls across it.

Pacific West's second hotline menu ended with no clue as to how one might make a personal call to one's personal loan officer and did not offer a third menu. It did insist she press a number, and while she tried to decide whether to try the first menu again or listen to this one another time, one ear filled with dial tone and the other with sirens.

Charlie checked her watch, her headache, her indigestion, and decided Dorothy would have to wait. She fed the hungry money slot and punched the office number. Even if she could find a cab, she wouldn't make the Bertinavita meeting now.

The monochrome hunk with the tight butt had the door open and leaned in across the passenger seat for the Sube's driver. Charlie put her foot back into its pump and released the other from its misery, calming it on the reverse calf, thinking of herons.

Shit. She got the noon-hour answering service. At least she was speaking to a human. "Evelyn? This is Charlie. Put me through anyway, will you? Somebody's got to be brownbagging it there."

"Charlie who?" Evelyn asked.

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When she convinced Evelyn to ring her through to Congdon and Morse, Charlie got her own voice mail. And the monochrome hunk turned toward her with a gaping mouth that could have been screaming for all she could hear over the arriving sirens. The emergency vehicles screamed toward them—not on the street, where even a stray dog would have had a squeeze getting through the traffic jam, but on the wide sidewalk, the only open space available.

"Larry," she told the voice mail when the mechanically pleasant faceless female—were these real people?—really?—informed her she didn't answer but could leave herself a message at the tone, "I've had car trouble. Cover the Bertinavita thing for me and make explanations and apologies? I'll try at least to get there late." Larry was her assistant and she could only hope he'd check on her calls in time.

The tan hunk had something red dripping off his elbows. Charlie didn't register the fact until she'd punched her home phone number and spent the last of her change. She didn't expect her daughter to answer and was resigned this time to talking to an answering machine that would at least talk to her from a familiar mouth she knew to be human.

But Libby had changed the message. "Listen, creep, nobody feels like talkin' to ya. We're nursing hangovers and AIDS. But leave a message and number after all the beeps and a survivor might just get back to ya."

Charlie slipped her foot back into her shoe, resigned to waiting out the giggles of her daughter and friends to reach the annoyance of the electronic belching. She'd replaced that damn machine just a few months ago.

Had the hunk just delivered a baby? Had there been time? Charlie did have a dim memory perception of the Subaru's driver being a woman. Two policemen hid her view and the beeps ended. "I told you not to mess with the message, Libby. I get business calls at home too. I'll be late tonight and the car's in for repairs so you need to find another mother to drive to play practice. I'll call again later but wanted to give you time to line up a driver right after school."

There wasn't room on the sidewalk for the fire truck trying to get through to wash the spilled gasoline away down the gutters. But two police cars pulled up and the static of their radios added yet another theme to the city fugue.

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Another pair of cops tried to unsnarl the mess at the intersection but the grid looked locked from four directions. A news helicopter droned an approach overhead. Charlie tried to shield the mouthpiece from some of the noise and yelled, "There's deli chicken to nuke for dinner and pasta salad."

"Sounds good."

"Excuse me?" Charlie turned to find a policewoman at her elbow.

"Deli chicken and pasta salad." The officer was short but solid, with a wide, mirthless smile and gold hair growing from black roots. "You want to step out of there, face that wall, place your hands flat against it, and spread your legs?"

Charlie was so stunned she did as she was asked and quick firm hands ran down her body and up the inside of her thighs before her outrage had time to surface. "Just a goddamned minute here, Officer, I was merely using a public telephone."

Charlie turned to find the officer pawing through her purse this time and the bronzed men, one in white tennis togs and the other in studio-jungle clothes, leaning over the sprung hood of the Mustang convertible, feet spread.

"Is this address current, and who were you talking to?" The officer handed Charlie's purse back but retained her wallet to flip through the clear plastic flaps that identified Charlie with credit bureaus and bureaucracy.

"My answering machine." Charlie'd had strange days before, but Jesus—

"You have to travel, what," the officer peered over the address in Charlie's wallet, "twenty-five miles to call yourself on a public phone and remind yourself what's in the fridge? Give me a break."

"I was leaving a message for my daughter."

"Right." But it was apparent that that made sense even to a cop. "You stay put until I put you through the computer." She walked over to the open door of a patrol car and read Charlie's statistics into a handset, glancing up often to be sure Charlie didn't run off unnoticed. Somewhere some computer was searching for the dirt on Charlie Greene. Unwed mother at sixteen, arrested for shoplifting at twelve (for an hour and a half before her mother bailed her out), traffic violations in Colorado and Maryland, and at one time or another Ds in Spanish and chemistry and algebra.

Obviously there was something very wrong with the driver of the Subaru. More sirens in the distance, plainclothes men thread-

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ing the backed-up traffic on foot to get here. This street was a poor imitation of a boulevard, with a dusty palm barely surviving every few yards on a narrow median separating four narrow lanes into two pairs trying to move traffic in opposite directions.

The traffic cops were managing to clear all traffic in the lanes across the median and an emergency van of some kind bumped over it to park head-on in front of the high-body pickup, effectively blocking the obvious means of cleaning up the jam behind the accident.

The policewoman returned with Charlie's wallet and pointed to the yellow hatchback. "This your Sentra?"

Charlie explained about her Toyota Corolla and All American and her vain attempt to get to the office today. "I called a cab from All American and it never showed, so I started walking and hailed the first cab I saw, which of course wasn't until about forty-five minutes later."

The few public phones she'd come across had been vandalized dead.

"If your business card's up-to-date, your office is on Wilshire."

"The cabbie didn't speak English. He was very polite, but we drove around forever."

"He couldn't find Wilshire? Or Beverly Hills?"

"Maybe it was the way I pronounced it."

The policewoman was trying hard to kill a smile. "So you got out here to use the phone. How long were you standing here, Ms. Greene?"

"I don't know, maybe twenty minutes. I had my back turned to the street and didn't see the accident but I heard it."

"That was pretty trusting, wasn't it? Turning your back on the street? Especially after the morning you'd had."

"The traffic was making so much noise I had to crouch into the plastic enclosure to hear over it."

"So how many phone calls did you make and who did you talk to?" She flipped open a notebook but stopped writing shortly into Charlie's answer. "You made three phone calls that took almost twenty minutes, but you never spoke to anybody?"

"Well, briefly to Evelyn but she'd forgotten who I was. She answers for a lot of other offices besides us."

"Why does your office have voice mail and an answering service too?"

"Business lunches can take several hours and we don't want to

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risk someone not leaving a name on the voice mail. This way if nobody's in the office at midday, we have a record." Knowing her story was already putting a hefty strain on the credulity of even an L.A. cop, Charlie was not about to go into what had happened to Gloria, the receptionist.

"Hey Osborne, what you got?" a sweating man with his tie loosened and his sports coat hanging open called to Charlie's interrogator.

Why plainclothes men at an accident site? Osborne met him halfway so they could talk privately. He kept glancing over at Charlie, his squint tightening with suspicion each time.

"Hell, I don't know," Osborne said finally, loud enough for Charlie to overhear, "seven, eight years ago when I came here, I wouldn't have bought it, but now . . ." She shook her head and raised her shoulders. "She's all yours, Lieutenant."

Charlie took a closer look at the lieutenant and kissed off not only the Bertinavita meeting and dinner with Libby and play practice but even the two scripts waiting on her night table.

"Modern world catching up with you, is it?" He wore large, rectangular, frameless glasses, bifocals, slightly rose-tinted but probably not enough to filter all the glint of sunlight off smog particles.

"I'm not going to be much use as a witness, Lieutenant." Hey, Bertinavita was not that big a deal. Larry could handle it. What were we talking, scripting a video backup for an olive-oil commercial to be surreptitiously slipped into a made-for-TV movie. "I didn't see the accident happen."

"You recognize either of the men standing by the Mustang or any of the vehicles involved here?"

"No." *Why me? Why did I have to be right here, right now?* Charlie was pretty sure you didn't need plainclothes lieutenants for your ordinary fender bender, even with injuries.

"I want a complete description of everything you saw and heard that went on between the Mustang, its driver, the pickup and its driver, the Subaru and its driver, and the Sentra. Even the stuff you don't think's important."

Charlie tried to stretch out what little information she had to offer, in hopes it would sound more helpful than it was. She had writers who tried that. Was that real blood on the monochrome man's forearms? Charlie's view of the Subaru's driver was effectively blocked by the authorities, but she could see a man kneeling on the hood with a camera photographing whatever lay within.

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And a woman with a camcorder panning the street, the sidewalk, Charlie, and her phone pole. The other side of the median had been cleared and backed-up traffic went two ways over there now, leaving Charlie and the crime scene in their own little world.

"You people are really fast," she finished lamely.

The approach of the gurney came as no real shock. It stood waiting for a small swarm of laboratory bees to finish their buzzing. Charlie and the lieutenant watched what little activity showed around the protective cordon of police backs until one back turned and the face above it nodded at them and the lieutenant took Charlie's elbow. "Something I'd like you to take a look at, Ms. Greene."

The driver of the Subaru had been a young white female with a gold band on her marriage finger. She'd been shot through the open window of her car, had died instantly, and thus caused the ensuing accident and tie-up of traffic. She'd lost a lot of blood. Packages of Pampers and Froot-Loops, loose avocados and oranges had tumbled from grocery bags in the backseat. An unbroken egg had rolled up against a blue box of tampons.

"And you didn't hear a gunshot?" Officer Osborne ended up with Charlie after all, and Charlie figured she knew why. They were in a small grungy room in a large grungy building where Charlie had attempted to write down all she'd seen and heard concerning the murder on the street. "You know what really fries my liver, lady?"

For some reason, Charlie objected to being called "lady" by another woman. "No, what?"

"Not that you didn't hear the shot, but that you don't seem to give a damn. You were so busy talking to answering machines and voice mail, you don't seem fazed by a murder that happened damn near next to you. That bullet could have hit you."

"But it didn't." Most of Charlie's writers dealt with murder these days. That's what was selling. But murder on paper or film made sense. There was a motive. And a hero came forth to right wrongs and bring the murderer to justice. Real murder was no fun. "This was a drive-by, huh?"

"Possible," Officer Osborne said. "So that means what? She deserved to die? Or that it doesn't matter because she's a stranger? You can't tell me this is something you'll just remember seeing on the evening news. Look, this is somebody's mother." Officer Osborne was obviously being used to draw Charlie

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out as one female to another—girl talk. Made sense.

"She had the same color hair as my daughter's," Charlie said, aware that she was using back. Wondering how she'd feel if that had been Libby on the gurney. Wondering when the child who once stared out the back window with unbearable pain in her heart as the family car passed helpless, hungry, homeless dogs and then began to notice stray people — when did that child become the adult Charlie behind the wheel? *You can't stop and help every stray dog. There are too many. And those people need to get off drugs and alcohol, go out and get jobs.* "Used to be just the cops who had to harden themselves to survive, huh?"

Osborne finally let her deadpan skew to a rueful smile. "I'm not getting anywhere with the shame ploy, huh?"

"Look, I'll admit I don't want to get involved here. But I had my back turned most of the time and really didn't see anything. I feel terrible for that poor woman and her family. I'm also glad it wasn't me who was shot. I'd vote for gun control tomorrow. But I've got a job, a kid to support — I can't waste my last ounce of energy agonizing over all the wrongs I can't do anything about. Any more than you can."

"The poor woman's name was Sheila Kennedy. She was a real person. Here's my card. If anything comes to you, like something you saw, but didn't notice—call me, okay?"

"On one condition. Can I use your phone?"

Osborne made an impatient squeak from somewhere at the back of her throat, but handed it over. Charlie dug out the claim check from All American Car Repair and pressed the numbers.

"Hawlmercan, c'n youhol pleece?" followed by Elvis crooning, "Are you lon-ne-some to-o-night?"

This was one of the horrors of Charlie's life. She was tone deaf, and being put on hold with Muzak — well, that's why God invented assistants. After two or three minutes the measured torture ended, to be followed by the modulated, disconnected voice of the phone mother. "If you would like to make a call, please hang up and try again. If you need assistance, please dial the operator."

That night, TV news informed Charlie that what was suspected to be another drive-by shooting had taken the life of Sheila Kennedy, mother of two small children. It showed footage of her young husband stepping out of a car to clutch her mother, and the two weeping in each other's embrace.

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Charlie shivered from way deep in her soul, but began the inevitable calling around to find out if play practice was over and where the kids were. As it happened, somebody's mom, instead of some dangerous older boy, delivered Libby early. And Libby, too worn out even to stay awake to argue about anything, trudged off to bed before Charlie had time to tell her about Sheila Kennedy.

Perhaps it was because Charlie couldn't talk about it to anyone who mattered that she dreamt of the murder of a perfect stranger and "fellow" mother that night. Or it could have been because Libby's damn cat had wrapped itself around Charlie's head.

But in Charlie's dream, a very small burst of smoke came from the driver's-side window of a gray BMW just like the one behind the bereaved husband and mother of the victim on the TV news.

There was no way Charlie could have seen the car across the median when awake and actually at the scene. Was there? She must have been looking at the plastic phone shield or the concrete block wall of the building next to her. Mustn't she? Seeing the car on the news suggested the dream. Right?

Charlie tried to ignore the whole thing until the next afternoon, when she decided she couldn't work unless she shoved the responsibility of this fantasy information onto somebody else. She found Officer Osborne's card and called the number out to Larry in his cubbyhole that guarded her door from the hall and the world.

Then she went back to shuffling paper between piles on her desk until Larry cruised in to explain that the number continued to be busy and so was he. But he would try again. He was even cuter than the monochrome guy with the tight butt. He left and minutes later yelled in to her. "It's ringing and I'm leaving for home."

Charlie hadn't realized how late it was. She should start for home now too. The commute to Long Beach was a killer and Libby would be out of cheerleading practice long before Charlie got there.

"Homicide, this is Osborne. Would you hold, please?"

And Frank Sinatra began to croon, "Tha-at's life . . ."

The mechanical woman replaced the receiver, slipped her feet into the pumps under her desk, grabbed her briefcase, and headed for the door. An important and early breakfast meeting in the morning, and Libby's play was tonight at Wilson High.

Charlie Greene did not have time for stupid dreams and neither did Officer Osborne. ●

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Art by Todd Lockwood

The Perfect Murder Club

by Reginald Hill

I switched on the news.

Starvation in Africa. Earthquake in Asia. War in Central Europe. Bombs in Belfast. And so many murders only the most gutting merited a soundbite.

Life was cheap.

One of the bodies lying by a roadside looked a bit like my bank manager. No way it could be. Nothing to do with him ever came cheap.

But it got me thinking. All these dead people and I didn't know any of them. What a waste!

I found a sheet of paper and started making a list of everyone I

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wouldn't mind seeing dead. I drew three columns; the first for the name, the second for the offense, the third . . . I wasn't yet sure what the third was for.

It turned out to be a surprisingly long list even though I limited myself to those I knew personally. Once start admitting people I didn't know, like those neanderthal yobs rampaging round the Arndale, or this horse-faced telly-hag now droning on about the Health Service, and the list could have gone on forever.

Finished, I read through it slowly, excising one name (gone to live in Provence, which surely must be regarded as some sort of sanctuary for the unspeakable) and adding two more.

Reginald Hill has been writing full-time since 1981. The quality he most wishes his crime fiction to exemplify is good plotting, for as he says in *Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers*, "Plot is the basis of narrative interest, that force that drives a reader along paths which ahead seem totally mysterious, but behind appear clear as day." His new piece for *EQMM* is a perfect paradigm of short-story plotting. For his latest long fiction see *Born Guilty* (St. Martin's).

On the box a weather forecaster was being brightly facetious. I studied her vacuous smile and was tempted. But no. Rules are rules.

So I turned to the problem of the third column. No problem! It was obvious what it was for. Mode of dying.

I had a lot of fun with this, making the death fit the life. Thus *he* whose halitosis had nauseated me these many years should choke on a pickled onion, while *she* whose voice had cut through my sensibility like a buzz saw should swallow her tongue.

But eventually the game palled. It was more interesting than TV but just as empty. What I needed was a strong shot of reality. I took another look at column three and soon saw where I'd gone wrong.

It wasn't for mode of dying, it was for method of killing.

Now fancies fled away. Now there was only one real consideration. How to do it and get away with it.

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I had to devise the perfect murder.

An hour later I was still staring at a blank column. Perfection, I'd discovered, was surprisingly difficult. Or perhaps what was surprising was that I should have been surprised. After all, I'd never come close to achieving it, not even in the things I used to do every day. Perhaps if I had I might still be doing them. But it was no use brooding over what had gone forever. What I needed was expert assistance. But there was no government retraining scheme in this field, and it was pointless turning to the Yellow Pages. One obvious condition of the perfect murder is that you don't advertise.

I let my mind go blank in the hope of enticing inspiration, and suddenly I found it being invaded by that most ephemeral of messages, a Radio 4 *Thought for Today*. It had been uttered by one of those bouncy bishops who like to be known as Huggable Henry or something equally expectatory. After the usual mega-maunderings, he had cast the following already soggy crumb of philosophy upon the morning waters.

Sometimes what looks like an insurmountable barrier can turn out to be an open door.

On the whole you'd be better off pulling Christmas crackers. But this time, in this one respect, it struck me that Bishop Henry might unawares have come within hugging distance of a truth.

Think about it. If you've committed a perfect murder, the last thing you do is go around shouting about it. But what's the point in perfection without appreciation? It must be like running a mile in under three minutes, and no one knowing about it. Of course, some people would probably be content to hug such knowledge to themselves. But if even a small fraction of the probable total of perfect murderers were as eager to talk about it as I was to listen, then all we had here was the classic marketing problem of how to match supply and demand.

Now this was something I *was* quite good at. I'd already established that *they* couldn't advertise. But there was nothing to stop *me*.

The next morning I went down to my local newspaper office. The young man I spoke to first proved singularly stupid and I found myself wishing I knew him well enough to put him on my list. But finally the advertising manager appeared, and after I explained to him that I wanted to place the ad in connection with a TV programme I was researching, all went smoothly. You could

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persuade people to show their arses in public if they thought it was for the telly. In fact, I believe if you're tuned to the right satellite, you can see it happening already.

My advertisement appeared that very same evening. I read it with a certain complacent pride.

HAVE YOU COMMITTED THE PERFECT MURDER?

If so, you've probably felt the frustration of not being able to tell anyone about it. But relax! Your troubles are over. A new organisation has been formed to exchange information on method and technique. To complete your job satisfaction and enjoy at last the applause which is your due, contact:

THE PERFECT MURDER CLUB
Confidentiality guaranteed. Ring now.
You won't regret it!

After some debate I'd given my home number. It was pointless running the ad unless people could get in touch. I knew it also opened access to undesirables like the police and the usual pranksters and cranks. But not having committed any crime myself (yet!) I had nothing to fear from the law. And as for the rest, I was pretty sure I could sort out the wheat from the chaff with a few pertinent questions.

The first call came within half an hour of the evening edition hitting the streets.

The caller was male, slightly adenoidal, and, I soon deduced, not very bright.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello." Pause. "Is that the . . . er . . . Perfect Murder Club?"

"Depends," I said. "How can I help you?"

"I dunno." Another pause. "Look, I saw your advert. . . . What's it all about?"

"It's about what it says it's about."

"Yeah . . . well . . ."

I could almost smell his desire to strut his stuff.

"Are you interested in becoming a member?" I asked, very businesslike.

"Yeah . . . well, maybe . . . it depends . . ."

"It does indeed," I said. "It depends on whether you are qualified. You're not a time-waster, I hope? Ringing up out of curiosity or for a giggle?"

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"No!" he replied indignantly.

"Okay. How about a few facts then, just to establish you qualify for membership. No names, of course. Nothing to give yourself away. Just an outline."

"Yeah? Well, all right. It was my wife. She fell down a cliff. Everyone thought it was an accident. It wasn't. I pushed her."

"I see. And where was this?"

"Scar . . . on holiday!"

What a twit!

"And that's it, is it?" I said.

"Yeah. Why? What's wrong with it?"

"It's not exactly perfect, is it?"

"What do you mean? She's dead. I'm married to a woman I really love. I got a hundred thou insurance. If that's not perfect, what is?"

"I'm glad things worked out so well for you," I said patiently. "But there was no guarantee she was going to die when you pushed her, was there?"

"It was a hundred-foot drop onto rocks!"

"So? There was a Yank fell five thousand feet when his parachute didn't open. Landed on a hypermarket roof in Detroit. Only injury was he sprained his ankle climbing down the fire escape. No, your wife could easily have survived to give evidence against you. Was it daylight? Good weather?"

"Of course. You don't go walking along that path in the dark when it's raining!"

"Right. Then suppose a birdwatcher had spotted you through his binoculars? Or another walker? Or maybe a farmer? Where would you have been then?"

"But that's the point! Nobody did!"

He was getting very agitated. Time to close.

"No," I said. "The point is this, Mr. . . . sorry, I didn't catch your name?"

"Jenkinson . . . oh shit!"

"Precisely, Mr. Jenkinson," I said. "You are clearly not a perfect murderer, merely an extremely lucky murderer. Word of advice, Mr. Jenkinson. Use some of that insurance money to have a mouth bypass or you could end up in real trouble. Bye now."

I chuckled as I replaced the receiver. Poor sod. Preening himself on being the undetected Maxwell of murder when all the time he was merely its John Major, in the right place at the right time and

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probably too wimpish for anyone to suspect he could have given the monstrous woman in his life a fatal shove.

I settled down to wait for more calls.

They came steadily over the next couple of hours. There were two clear cranks, one confessing to the murder of Marilyn Monroe, the other claiming to be Lord Lucan, plus a few pranksters, sadly unimaginative in their tall stories. I was entertained by an indignant lady who told me I was a symbol of the moral corruption of our society and invited me to repent at a charismatic pray-in she was holding in her house later that evening. I excused myself, but compensated a little later by sending along a couple of men who'd mistaken my advert for a coded signal for the next meeting of their sadomasochist group.

And as anticipated I heard from the police. Of course the mastermind who called didn't say he was police but pretended to be a punter. It was like listening to some village thespian stumbling through *Hamlet*. I let him ramble on, till finally, thinking he'd got me fooled, he said, "Look, I'm sure I've got something that would interest you, but I'd rather not discuss it on the phone."

"Perfectly understandable," I said. "Do drop in any time you like. I'm sure you've traced my address by now."

Pity we don't have video phones. I would have liked to see the expression on his face as I rang off.

Now all this was good fun, but as yet there'd been nothing to help me in my serious research. Then finally, just as I was giving up hope, I got a call which sounded like it might be genuinely useful.

It was a woman's voice, youngish, rather nervous, but with an underpinning of determination that made me feel this wasn't just a time-waster.

Not that she gave anything away. I liked her caution. The urge to share a triumph is one thing, the kind of stupid gabbiness displayed by the idiot Jenkinson quite another.

For a long time we just walked around the subject, but I soon became aware that I wasn't doing all the leading. In the end I felt myself being steered into the first steps to openness.

I said, "So what is it I can do for you, Miss . . . er . . . ?"

Not even acknowledging this clumsy attempt to get her name, she said, "I would like to be able to talk in safety."

"The Samaritans are said to be very discreet," I said, trying to regain the initiative. "And sympathetic."

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She fell silent for a while, then said softly, "It's not sympathy I want. It's empathy. And appreciation."

Gotcha! I thought.

"I think the Club can guarantee both of those," I said in my strong, serious voice. "If you could perhaps just give a flavour of what you would be bringing . . ."

Another silence. Then speaking very carefully she said, "It's to do with a person who had the power to injure me. I was not able to continue under this threat. So I worked out a method for disposing of this person without leaving any clue to link the death to myself."

"A method?" I said, perhaps too eagerly. "Poison? Accident? Can't you give a hint?"

"I think I've said enough," she said, her nervousness returning. "Perhaps too much. The compulsion to talk is strong, but the instinct of self-preservation is stronger."

I was terrified I'd lost her. This was the genuine article, there was no doubt in my mind. This was someone who had the brains to work out what had to be done and the will to do it.

I said, "I understand, believe me. You who have already had to extricate yourself from someone's power will be more reluctant than any of us to risk re-creating that situation. This is precisely why the Club has been formed. Nobody will hear your story who has not a similar story to tell in return. When secrets are exchanged, their power is cancelled. Believe me, any confession made here is as safe as any ever heard by priest in the confessional."

I stopped myself from saying more. I could feel her being tempted, but it was her own desire which would bring her to me, not anything further I could say.

She said, "I would need to see you face-to-face before I could decide whether to trust you."

"No problem," I said. I could still sense her hesitancy. This was no time for making rendezvous with copies of the *Times* and white carnations. To bring her into the open I had to put myself there first.

"My name," I said, "is Hulbert. I live at Bullivant House, Flat Thirty-six. I shall be here all evening."

"Alone?" she said, suspicious still.

"I promise. And of course you may check before you as much as open your mouth."

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"I will, be assured. If I come."

The phone went dead.

After that it was a case of sitting and waiting and hoping. The phone rang again a couple of times. One was a pushy young fellow who said he hadn't committed a murder but would really like to try. I told him it was like a good golf club, you needed an official handicap before you could join. The other was my ex-wife, one of whose ferrety friends had recognised my number in the ad and passed the information on. She pretended concern for my mental health, but I knew that all she was really worried about was whether I'd hit upon some moneymaking scheme I wasn't revealing to her solicitor.

I knew better than to offer a simple denial but told her, yes, I was collecting material for a book and all I needed to get lift-off was a little financial backing to help me hire a top PR firm and could she see her way . . .

She'd rung off by now, so I turned to my list and promoted her from number four to number three, above my ex-mistress. Equal first remained my ex-accountant who'd mishandled my finances and run off with my ex-wife, and my ex-boss who'd made me redundant and shacked up with my ex-mistress.

I was debating further revision when the doorbell rang. She'd come! I dropped the list onto the coffee table and hurried to let her in before she could change her mind.

A man stood there, square jawed, red haired, and built like a rugby-league forward. I'd never seen him before but I recognised his voice as soon as he spoke.

"Evening, Mr. Hulbert. You were right. No problem tracing your address."

It was the cop I'd spoken to earlier. With my nervous murderess on the way, this was a nuisance.

Deciding the quickest way to get rid of him was to cut through the crap, I said, "Good evening, Inspector."

"Sergeant, actually," he said, producing his warrant card. "Sergeant Peacock. All right if I come in?"

He pushed by me as he spoke. Hamlet he might not be, but when it came to acting the heavy, he was clearly well rehearsed.

He said, "It's about this advert of yours, sir. We found it . . . intriguing."

"But not illegal," I said confidently.

"Not in itself maybe. But it could be a channel to illegality."

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"I'm sorry?"

"Taken at its face value, this ad invited people who've committed murder to confide in you. If anyone did confess murder to you and you didn't pass on the information to us, that might be an offense. If after making that confession, this person or any persons privy to the confession went on to commit a similar offense, that too might make your advert an offense. Or if . . ."

"All right," I said impatiently. "I get the picture. All I can do is assure you that I placed the ad on a frivolous impulse, nothing more. It's a joke, a mere squib. Naturally, which I much doubt, if any of those replying should rouse my suspicions in any way, I would of course immediately contact the police."

He wasn't so easily satisfied.

He said, "So you've had replies?"

"A few. Cranks, mostly. Nutters. Nothing to worry you with."

"We worry quite a lot about nutters, sir," he said significantly, his gaze drifting down to the coffee table.

Too late I recalled that my death list lay upon it, difficult but not impossible to read upside down. This put paid to any immediate implementation. Even if my nervous murderess did turn up with the perfect method, I'd be mad to start knocking off people whose names might have registered on Peacock's suspicious mind.

I said, "There we are then, Sergeant. Now unless there's anything else, I have a heavy day tomorrow and would really like an early night."

"Of course, sir," he said. "Work, is it?"

"Indirectly," I said. "Looking for it. I'm one of the three million, I'm afraid."

He didn't look surprised. He probably knew already. Once he'd got my name and address from the telephone company, it must have been easy to check everything else, from my health record to my credit rating. I could feel all my *ex*es getting safer by the second.

"Good luck, sir," he said. "A job's important. I've seen what not having one can do to the most sensible of people. Leads them into all kinds of stupidities. Like putting silly ads in the paper."

"Yes, I'm sorry. And if anything in the least suspicious turns up . . ."

The doorbell rang.

I suppose in that brief moment my expression must have flick-

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ered from faintly-embarrassed-honest-citizen to guilty-thing-surprised and back, for he was onto me like a claims clerk.

"Expecting someone, sir?"

"No . . . well, not exactly . . ."

"Wouldn't be someone who answered your ad, would it, sir?"

I could only shrug helplessly. I mean, I was sorry for my nervous murderess, if that's who it was, but after all, I had still committed no crime.

Peacock said, "I think maybe I should deal with this. What's through that door?"

"The kitchen," I said.

"Right. You duck in there and don't come out till I tell you," he said.

What could I do but obey? I went through, leaving the door just a fraction open behind me so I could hear what was going on.

I heard his footsteps cross the tiny hall, then the front door open.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Hulbert?"

I recognised the voice instantly as belonging to my nervous murderess.

"Yes."

"We spoke on the phone earlier."

"Oh yes."

He really was a terrible actor. He couldn't hope to get by on monosyllables forever!

"You are the Mr. Hulbert who spoke to me on the phone?" insisted the woman. "About the Club?"

"Yes I am," declared Peacock, at last getting some conviction into his voice. "And what might your name be?"

I strained my ears for her reply, but all I heard was a noise like a kitchen knife cutting through an iceberg lettuce followed by a sort of bubbly sigh and a gentle thud.

Then silence. Broken by a man's voice—not Peacock's—saying thickly, "Oh my God."

"Shut that door," said the woman. "You want everyone looking in?"

"No. Let's get out of here! What are you doing?" The voice was spiralling into panic.

"Just checking in case he made any notes."

The woman's voice was unexpectedly close. She must have

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moved silently into the living room. Fortunately when startled I tend to freeze rather than jump. I held my breath as I listened to her rustling through the pad on the telephone table and searching through its single drawer.

"Nothing," she said.

"Sylvie, please hurry," pleaded the man in vaguely familiar tones. "God knows who else he's got coming round here!"

"You reckon the world's full of idiots like you who want to shoot their mouths off to strangers?"

Her tone was tinged with affectionate exasperation rather than real scorn and her words triggered the memory which the man's voice had primed. This was Jenkinson, who'd pushed his wife off a cliff at Scarborough. Sylvie must be the lover he'd referred to. And perhaps his accomplice? No. That wasn't likely. In the first place from what he'd said, the murder sounded more like a sudden impulse than a thought-out plan, and in the second place, if he'd confided in Sylvie even after the event, he wouldn't have felt the urge to ring the Perfect Murder Club.

Her next words confirmed this.

"If only you'd told me what happened, there'd have been no need for this."

"It didn't seem right to tell you somehow," said Jenkinson unhappily.

I could see his point. When proposing marriage it can't strengthen your case to reveal that you pushed your last wife off a cliff. But once it dawned on him that he'd been stupid enough to give a complete stranger the means to identify him, he'd gone running to her.

How marvellous to have a woman whose reaction to such a revelation was neither outrage nor recrimination, but direct action to clear up the mess. I felt quite envious. Dim wimp he might be, but Jenkinson must have something I didn't to inspire such loyalty, even if it was only a hundred thousand quids' worth of insurance money!

"Right," said Sylvie. "Nothing here. You haven't touched anything? Okay. Let's go."

I stood with my ear pinned to the kitchen door till I was sure they had left. Then I waited another five minutes to be absolutely certain.

My relief at not being discovered had been so great that it didn't leave much of my mind to speculate on the possible connection

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between Sergeant Peacock and the noise of a kitchen knife slicing through a lettuce, so when at last I peeped through the door into the hallway, I could still pretend I wasn't sure what I was going to find.

I saw at once that I'd been right about the kitchen knife but wrong about Peacock not getting away with monosyllables forever. They'd seen him into eternity, no bother. He looked quite peaceful slumped against the wall with the knife sticking out of his throat. His eyes were still open and seemed to be staring straight at me. Suddenly I felt a surge of hope that perhaps after all he wasn't dead. I stooped over him, took the knife handle in my fingers, and with infinite care drew it out of the wound.

That was how his driver, coming up to tell the sergeant he was wanted on the car radio, found me.

At my trial he testified he'd seen no one either entering or leaving the building after Peacock went in. But of course he wouldn't have been able to see the side door I'm sure my careful little murderess used. Naturally I told both the police and my lawyer about the man called Jenkinson who'd pushed his wife off a cliff at Scarborough. They both checked independently and both discovered there was no record of anyone of that name dying of any cause in that area in the past ten years.

Only later did it occur to me that I'd deduced Scarborough from a single syllable. It might have been Scafell in the Lakes, or the Isle of Scarba in the Inner Hebrides, or Mount Scaraben in Caithness, or simply Scar in the Orkneys.

But by then it was all over. I was sure that once Sylvie Jenkinson realised what had happened, she had set about covering their tracks too deep for pursuit. Besides, I found I didn't really want to pursue them. If a perfect murder is one you get away with, they've managed one each. That's a record you've got to respect. If they have kids, we may yet see something really spectacular.

And really spectacular is what it will have to be to make the headlines. I still watch the news every night. Life in here isn't all that different from life outside, not if you've been unemployed for a year or two. And life out there hasn't changed much either.

Starvation in Africa. Floods in Asia. War in Central Europe. And queues for hospital beds in Britain.

Now they've gone over to *Today in Parliament* where they are all bawling and yelling and bickering about whether kids today spell better or worse than kids twenty years ago. Suddenly as I

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watch this spectacle I get a surprising revelation, like Huggable Henry's *Thought for Today*.

A man who sets his sights too low can't win even if he hits his bull.

The headline roundup running across the screen confirms it.

The EEC are making farmers pour milk away because they have exceeded their quota.

Fifty kids an hour are dying of starvation in Somalia.

Some prat of a politician may have to resign because he's been humping his secretary.

Twenty thousand Bosnian women may have been raped in the past six months.

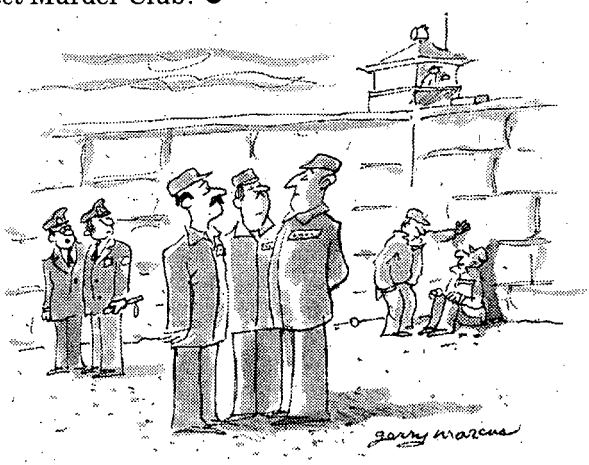
An England striker has been flown home from Italy for treatment to a strained tendon.

In Sarajevo they're so short of medical supplies, they are amputating limbs without anaesthetic.

Suddenly everything's clear to me. No wonder I ended up in here. I was fighting out of my league. I set up business in competition with the multinationals. Westminster, Brussels, Washington, the UN—God is always on the side of the big guns. And now it's too late even to join, as they tell me convicted criminals aren't eligible for election to Parliament.

I suppose it's only fair really. They've got to be choosy.

I mean, innocent or guilty, if you've been stupid enough to get caught, how can you possibly hope to qualify for membership in the Perfect Murder Club? ●



"They're quite a clannish group. They are all butlers who 'did it.' "

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The Clockwork Rat

by Edward D. Hoch

Series character Michael Vlado, a Gypsy king, belongs to a settled community in the mountains of Romania. Most Gypsies, however, are nomadic even today. In the following story, the wanderings of a Gypsy dwarf in search of work lead him to the vice-infested clubs of post-Communist Russia, with the crime-solving Vlado soon to follow. As always, Mr. Hoch has researched and realistically depicted the setting for his story. †

Old Caspian came to visit Michael Vlado one day in the spring, when the horses were running in the field. He stood for a time watching them, as he often did on visits to the Gypsy village in the foothills of Romania's Transylvanian Alps. Finally, after nearly an hour, he came to the point of his visit.

"One of my people is in trouble, Michael—a Rom like ourselves, though he lives in Moscow."

"Moscow is a long way from here," Michael said quietly, knowing what was going to be asked of him.

"You went there once before, to race a horse, when the Communists were still in power. It is a different place now."

"But trouble is always the same. I try to avoid it."

Old Caspian sighed. "Ten years younger and I would go myself, Michael."

"Tell me about this trouble. I promise nothing."

Caspian brought out his pipe and stuffed the bowl with tobacco. He took his time lighting it, and Michael feared he was in for a long story. "He's a dwarf," the old man said. "I suppose that's how he got the job in the first place."

"What job is that?"

"With the coming of capitalism to Russia, several private clubs

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have sprung up around Moscow. My little friend Maksim is employed at one of them, dressed up like a page boy from a couple of centuries ago. They have gambling there, and drugs. Maksim wants desperately to leave Moscow and return home, but he is a virtual prisoner, treated as little more than a slave. He owes a large sum of money to gangsters—the Russian Mafia as the press likes to call them—and they keep him working against his will. He fears they would kill him if he tried to escape."

"What can I do?" Michael Vlado asked. "I do not have the money to ransom him."

"You are a Gypsy king, my friend," Caspian reminded him. "You could get Maksim out safely. They would not dare to harm you."

"I'm sure your Russian Mafia, or whatever you call them, would have little respect for a Gypsy of whatever rank."

"Look, Michael, you are my only hope! We have no one to represent us, no one to protect our interests. There is no Rom ambassador, in Moscow or anywhere else."

Michael considered the appeal, knowing he should turn it down but reluctant to do so. "They might not even let me enter the country."

"You still have your Romanian passport, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Then they will let you in. Everything is much looser in Russia today."

"Including the crime."

Caspian persisted. "I just want Maksim out alive. I know you can do it for me."

Michael Vlado shook his head, trying one last time to say no. "It's two days' drive to Moscow, and another two back. I can't be gone that long."

"I will buy you a plane ticket, and give you money for two return tickets."

"Why does this dwarf Maksim mean so much to you?"

The old man simply stared at him. Finally he turned away, perhaps to hide a tear. "He is my grandson."

On the flight to Moscow the following day, Michael considered the story old Caspian had told him. The man's daughter, Sasha, whom Michael remembered holding in his arms when she was a baby, had joined a traveling circus some twenty-five years earlier, working as a bareback rider and touring throughout the Socialist

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countries of Eastern Europe. Later, with the new freedom engendered by the fall of Communism, she had returned home briefly to Caspian's village. During her circus days she had borne a son named Maksim who was in his early twenties now. It was only recently that Caspian had learned that part of the story, after Sasha departed once more and left him a long letter.

Maksim's father, short of stature but not, like his son, a dwarf, was an animal trainer with the circus. Sasha had fallen in love with him and they'd had a child. When it became clear that young Maksim would never achieve full adult height, his father began teaching him the business of training animals. The boy was especially adept at handling and breeding performing rats, and rats were always in large supply when the circus set up its tents in the fields of the old cities.

After 1991, when the changes in Russia accelerated, Maksim and his father left the circus and moved to Moscow. Sasha had returned to her home village in Romania, feeling that her son was now an adult and able to fend for himself. Once in Moscow, Maksim and his father quickly found work in the shadowy world of private gambling, arranging races using their trained rats. But last fall something happened. Maksim's father dropped out of sight and Maksim ended up owing the mob a great deal of money. He'd been kept in servitude ever since, working off his debt at one of the many private clubs in the Moscow area. Sasha had again left her village to earn money to send him, but meanwhile, Caspian's grandson remained in a sort of forced servitude.

It was obvious to Michael Vlado that he would not get far in Moscow as a Gypsy, not even as a Gypsy king. Once he cleared customs at Domodedovo Airport, he assumed the role of a Romanian businessman. He used most of the money for the two return plane tickets to purchase a suit of clothes and accessories at the huge GUM department store in Red Square. Walking among the fountains in the lofty glass-roofed galleries of the store, he could almost feel like a capitalist. The feeling remained with him back in his tiny hotel room as he changed into the unfamiliar clothes.

The address Caspian had given him was for the Club Nikolas, an elaborate old mansion located next to the city's soccer stadium near the airport. Michael had rented a car and he parked near the club, walking up the drive just as the hazy spring evening was at last yielding to darkness. A uniformed guard standing by the massive oak doors of the building was hardly welcoming, and when

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Michael pressed the bell he had no idea what to expect. The door was opened by a somber young man in evening clothes who said in Russian, "Your membership card, please."

"I have none. I understood I could be admitted on a temporary basis while my membership is being processed," Michael replied, also in Russian.

"No, no! A membership card is required!"

"My name is Michael Vlado. I have come from Bucharest on business. May I see your manager?"

The doorman picked up a house telephone and spoke a few words into it. He glowered at Michael, apparently in response to a question he had been asked, and finally answered in the affirmative. He hung up the phone and said with visible distaste, "Follow me."

They walked perhaps twenty feet down an oak-paneled hall to a closed door. From farther down the hall came the sound of voices and music. The doorman turned the knob. "In here."

A stout Russian in a tuxedo was seated behind a carved mahogany desk in an office that seemed a relic of fifty years ago. Only the beige computer and printer on a side table seemed out of place..

Michael immediately introduced himself and shook hands. The Russian, obviously uncertain about this unknown Romanian, said simply, "I am Oleg Kizim, manager of the Club Nikolas."

"I was told I could apply for membership here. My business brings me to Moscow frequently these days."

Kizim smiled. "What business would that be?"

"I own a large automobile dealership in Bucharest."

"Did someone recommend the Club Nikolas?"

"One of my employees is related to a member of your staff — Maksim Wanovich."

The club manager was startled into laughter. "The man's a dwarf!"

"I understood him to be a highly skilled animal trainer."

"Among our features at the Club Nikolas are the nightly rodent races. Maksim is in charge of those. It is a popular gambling game."

"I would like to see that," Michael assured him.

Oleg Kizim considered the request. "Our rules are not overly strict here. If you plan on taking out a membership—"

"What is the cost?"

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"We prefer payment in Western currency if possible. The annual dues are three thousand American dollars or its equivalent in British, French, or German currency."

"That would be no problem. Or if you'd accept a check drawn on a Romanian bank, I could give it to you now."

The manager held up his hand. "I prefer Western currency if it is available to you. Tomorrow would be fine."

"But I am free to spend the evening here?"

"Yes, of course, Mr. Vlado. I'll give you a temporary membership card. We have a health spa downtown too which you may use."

"And those rodent races?"

"A large room in back. Anyone can direct you."

During the next few minutes Michael gained a quick impression of the Club Nikolas. There was a room for casino gambling and another for cabaret-style shows. The dining room was crowded, though the usual hour for dinner had passed. An oak-paneled library with reading nooks could have been part of some staid old London club, except for a small amber-lit bar at one end where a short blond barmaid, still attractive in her late thirties, was mixing drinks. Her nametag read *Alexandra* in both English and Russian. It seemed a fitting name for the Club Nikolas.

"Which way to the races?" he asked her.

"Through the door to your left." Her smile widened. "Buy your chips from the cashier and good luck."

"It's my first time," Michael admitted. "Are there any tips on how to play?"

"Watch a few races first before you bet," she advised. "On busy nights they run the same rats several times. The early winners sometimes tire. Bet on a loser when you believe his turn has come."

He gave her a smile. "Thank you for the tip. If I win you'll get part of it."

The gambling room was large enough to hold perhaps a hundred people. Most were men and Michael decided it was not a sport to hold any special appeal for women. There were four tracks, really neon-lit glass tubes, which were attached to the walls one above the other and circled the room. Each was numbered, with track one at the top. The large white rats were placed in glass holding boxes and released simultaneously by a little man with curly black hair, dressed as an eighteenth-century page. Surely this was Maksim Wanovich, though whether he was short enough to qual-

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ify as a true dwarf was open to question. He did have to reach up to release the rats, about five feet above the floor, and then he urged them on by the ringing of a small hand bell. The spectators held scorecards, and as at any race they cheered their favorites as the four rats burst from the starting gate. The bank of tubes gradually rose, sending the tracks above the entrance door and then down again toward the finish line.

This time the winner was rat number three, reaching his reward of food by a good margin. There was a wait of about ten minutes between races while chips on the winning numbers were paid off and new bets placed. Chips were sold and redeemed at a cashier's window just outside the door. Michael used the time between races to approach the costumed dwarf. When he was close enough he could read *Maksim* on his nameplate.

"Hello, Maksim," he said quietly. "I am a friend of your grandfather's back in Romania."

The dwarf's head jerked up as if he'd been struck. "I have no grandfather. He is dead."

"No, Caspian is old, but very much alive. He sent me to get you out of here."

Maksim glanced around nervously. "I cannot talk. I have races to run."

The blond barmaid, Alexandra, appeared with a tray of drinks for the gamblers. A slender young Englishman who could have been her son ran his hand over the rear of her tight satin pants. Her smile froze, but she kept passing out the drinks as if nothing had happened. Michael took two quick steps and locked his fingers around the man's wrist. "You could lose a hand that way," he said in English.

"What—? Who the bloody hell are you?"

"Please," Alexandra said to Michael. "You'll only get me in trouble."

He let go of the man's wrist. "Sorry. I thought you were molesting her."

"Do you work here?" the Englishman asked.

"I'm a member," Michael replied, stretching the truth.

Maksim rang his bell and the next race began. There were the usual shouts from the spectators as the four white rats sped along their glass tubes. It was, Michael decided, not too different from the day some years back when he'd been at the Moscow racetrack. The animals were smaller, but the spectators were just as vocal.

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Rat number one came in first, to the delight of the Englishman. He was so pleased as he collected his winnings that he fell into a conversation with Michael. "Sorry about that earlier. I've probably had a bit too much to drink. Name's Sam Croydon."

"Michael Vlado."

"I'm designing a golf course here, introducing the Russians to Western ways. I think we can make golf as big in Russia as it is in Japan. What about you?"

"I have an auto dealership in Romania. I'm here to see about purchasing Russian cars."

The Englishman chuckled. "They're not much good. Stick with the Germans or Italians." He pocketed his winnings and strolled out toward the bar.

Michael decided it was time to take a chance. He bet on rat number three in the next race and watched him come in second. The winning bet paid odds of three to one, and since about the same amount was wagered on each rat, that meant the club kept about a quarter of all bets. Michael had two more losses before he started winning, picking three winning rats in a row. But Maksim was still reluctant to speak with him. It was obvious that even in the new Russian society people were constantly on their guard when dealing with foreigners.

"I am a Rom like yourself," Michael managed to tell him between races, as he was removing the rats from their tubes and substituting new ones. "Tell me what happened to your father. I have come here to help you both."

"You cannot help him. He is dead."

"Was he killed?"

But Maksim ignored him, raising his voice to announce, "The next race will be run with the clockwork rat in the number two position." He pressed a button on the wall.

Michael realized that only three white rats were present in the tubes and the number two tube was empty. He saw the Englishman, Croydon, reenter the room and went over to ask him about it. "What is a clockwork rat?"

"A windup, like a child's toy. Sometimes if they have three rats and the rest are tired or lame they add the toy rat so that the betting odds will remain the same. It goes quite fast, but experienced bettors know it hardly ever wins. Here comes Kizim now to wind it. If it's not wound tightly enough it runs too slow, and he doesn't trust the dwarf to do it right."

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The stout Russian manager removed the clockwork rat from a drawer beneath the glass racing tubes and inserted a key in its side. He began turning the key with a measured vigor.

The sudden explosion sounded no louder than a firecracker. Then Michael saw the blood and fire on the front of Kizim's tuxedo and realized it had been a bomb.

The Russian was dead before the first ambulance arrived. The detectives and police who came with it were an odd mixture of civilian and military — the latter, Michael supposed, because of the bomb. These were in uniform, and they seemed more efficient than the stocky men in baggy dark suits who checked identification and asked pointless questions. Michael had been seated with the other customers, waiting his turn with the police, when one of the uniformed men announced, "We have arrested a suspect. It will not be necessary to question you individually unless you have specific knowledge of this crime. Please leave your name and address and we will contact you later if necessary."

Michael had been wondering how to explain his presence, and his first reaction to the announcement was one of relief. Then, as he was leaving the Club Nikolas with the other guests, Alexandra ran up to him. "Maksim has been arrested for the murder! Can you help?"

"Arrested? Why him?"

"The police discovered there was bad blood between them, and he had charge of the clockwork rat, with the best opportunity to plant the bomb. It makes sense to them. He told me to get you, that you are a friend of his grandfather."

"Who is the officer in charge?" Michael asked.

"Ivan Vasili. He is a lieutenant in this district. He comes here frequently, sometimes off-duty."

"I will try to speak with him," he promised.

Sam Croydon had seen Michael talking with Alexandra and he was waiting with a smirk on his face. "You have to admit, old chap, that she's easy on the eyes."

"I never denied it. Do you come here often?"

"I did until tonight. When bombs start going off, I stay away. It's a Bolshevik thing, you know — those bowling-ball bombs with the lighted fuse coming out of them, just as in the cartoons."

"It wasn't that sort of bomb, and the Bolsheviks are gone."

"Gone but not forgotten."

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"Do you know who this Lieutenant Vasili is, the one who's handling the investigation?"

Croydon glanced around at the crowd outside the Club Nikolas. "I saw him just a moment ago. He's a regular at the club." Suddenly he pointed toward a black sedan. "There he is, with the dwarf!"

Maksim was in handcuffs, being placed in the backseat of the car. Michael wanted to run up and try to free him, but he knew such action would have brought a bullet in response. Much as he hated to admit it, old Caspian's grandson might even be guilty of the crime. Perhaps he had good and sufficient reason for wanting the manager dead.

The hour was already late and he decided to wait until morning. Things might look different by daylight.

Michael was staying at an old, inexpensive hotel near the Pushkin Art Museum. There were no shades on the windows and he was awakened by the first light of day. He had breakfast and tried to read a newspaper account of the bombing at the Club Nikolas. His Russian was not good enough to grasp it all, but he saw that Maksim was described as a suspected terrorist.

He took a taxi to the central police headquarters and asked to see Lieutenant Vasili, saying it was about the bombing. After a twenty-minute wait in a bare, depressing room, the man in the baggy suit appeared. He carried a list of those who'd been at the club the previous night, and after Michael identified himself the detective led him back to a cubicle. "What do you have to tell me?" he asked, taking out a pack of Russian cigarettes.

"I was sent here by Maksim's grandfather. He was being forced to work at that club because of debts he'd run up."

"He told us that. It makes a good motive for wanting Kizim dead."

"But would he do it in such a manner, in the very room where he worked? And what would Maksim know about making bombs?"

The detective lit his cigarette. "It is an unfortunate fact of life that such knowledge is easy to come by these days. He admits that during his youth in the circus he helped his parents make firecrackers for the clowns to use in their act."

"What happened to his father, Yegor Wanovich?"

Ivan Vasili shrugged. "The mobs have a certain power in the city at this moment. Places like the Club Nikolas always attract

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them. They see it as a good semi-legal source of Western currency. Possibly Wanovich's father stood in their way."

"He was killed?"

"We have no proof of that. No one has looked too hard for him. He was only a Gypsy from the circus."

"I would like to speak with young Maksim."

"That would be highly irregular. We have not yet finished our interrogation."

"I am a fellow Rom," Michael said, realizing it might be the wrong thing to say. "I am king of the Gypsy tribe to which Maksim's grandfather belongs. He lives in a village not far from me. Let me talk to him."

"You are a Gypsy king?" Vasili stared at him, studying him as if for the first time. "That is something like a judge, is it not?"

"I have held court," Michael admitted. "It is an informal court, called a *kris,* but my decisions carry weight within our community."

The detective thought for a moment and then said, "I will respect your position, Michael Vlado. You may speak with the prisoner for ten minutes, no longer."

"Thank you."

Michael waited while Vasili stepped into the next room to use the telephone. Presently he was escorted along a narrow corridor to an interrogation room with one small window. Maksim sat alone at a long table that made him look even smaller than he was. In place of his eighteenth-century pageboy garb, he wore a gray prison uniform. "You again!" he said as Michael entered. "Thank you for coming." He probably would have welcomed anyone at that moment.

"I have only ten minutes, Maksim. Tell me what you know of the killing."

"I know nothing, believe me! They say I killed him because he was holding me in bondage for my father's unpaid debts. But I am innocent!"

"Your father's debts? How did that happen?"

He spoke with childish naivete, remembering the days with the circus. "It was good then. Coming to Moscow was different. My mother had returned home and there were just the two of us. But I had my rats, and that got us a job at the Club Nikolas, which was just opening up. I did well, running the rats through the glass tubes my father had constructed. But once the place was open

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there was no job for him except kitchen work. One night last autumn he simply disappeared. He never came back to the little apartment we shared with a pair of music students."

"That detective, Vasili, thinks the mob played a part in his disappearance."

Maksim snorted. "Vasili himself is in the pay of the mob, as are many of the police. He would never suggest that if it were true. Oleg Kizim insisted my father had stolen money from him, and he forced me to continue working there until he considered the debt repaid."

"With Kizim dead you're free to go?"

"Yes," Maksim said with some irony in his voice, glancing around at the somber walls. "I am free at last."

Michael Vlado considered the possibilities. The club manager's death could have been an outgrowth of his troubles with Maksim and his father, or it could have had some other cause, probably mob-related. "Is there any possibility that your father could have rigged that bomb in the clockwork rat before his disappearance?"

"None. We use it two or three times a week. There are two of them but we use them both at least once a week. Both were used two nights ago and Kizim wound them as he always did. The bomb must have been placed in it during the last two days."

"Did your father have a key to the club? Could he have slipped in while the place was closed?"

"It's only closed for cleaning for a few hours in the early morning. Even then, someone is always in the building. We all came and went as we pleased. But I told you, he is dead, and I don't believe in spirits."

"You say there are two of those windup devices?"

"Yes, in case one breaks down. They're both kept in the drawer."

"So the killer could have borrowed one and tampered with it and then returned it to its place."

"I suppose so. The drawer isn't locked. A key is needed for the rat itself, but a key for any windup toy would probably fit. And there's one in the drawer anyway."

"Would anything have prevented your father from returning to the club, slipping back in during those early morning hours, and tampering with the mechanical rat?"

"Not if he's still alive."

Michael saw that his ten minutes was almost up. "If the mob

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was responsible for your father's disappearance, who would it be? I need a name."

"The detective, Vasili, is paid off by a Georgian named Gogol. At least, that's what he's called. I sometimes see him meeting with Kizim."

"Where can I find Gogol?"

"He hangs around a health club named Elite, near Red Square. It's connected with the Club Nikolas somehow."

"Time's up," Ivan Vasili announced, returning to the interrogation room.

"I'm finished," Michael said, getting to his feet.

He knew Maksim's eyes were on him as he left the room.

Michael spent the afternoon at the Elite Health Spa, trying out the Jacuzzi, a foaming tub of hot water that he'd never before experienced. Then he moved on to the exercise cycles and the weight room. It was an invigorating way to spend a few hours, but no one he spoke to would admit knowing a man called Gogol.

He had used his temporary membership card for the Club Nikolas to gain admission to the Elite, and obviously there was a connection between the two. The woman at the desk told him any charges would appear on his monthly statement from Club Nikolas. That evening, after eating lightly at his hotel, he returned to the club. Most of the rooms seemed much the same, and the place was crowded, though the back room used for the rodent races was closed and locked.

He saw Alexandra at the bar and went to speak with her. She seemed drained of color and there were beads of sweat visible on her forehead. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"I've just had a shock. A new manager has been appointed for the club. He is a man I dislike intensely."

"Did he work here before?"

She shook her head. "He would come and meet with Oleg Kizim. He is a bad man, worse than Kizim was."

The mention of meetings sparked a memory of something Maksim had told him that morning. "What is the new manager's name?"

"Everyone calls him Gogol."

"I saw Maksim at police headquarters this morning. He mentioned that name."

"How is Maksim?" she asked, trying to smile.

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"He seemed well. They were still questioning him. But he did tell me this man Gogol is associated with the mobs that have sprung up in Moscow recently. He might even know something about the disappearance of Maksim's father."

"That was before I came," she told him. "I have worked here only since January, many months after Yegor Wanovich's disappearance." Suddenly she caught her breath and whispered, "There he is!"

Michael turned, thinking for an instant that she meant Yegor, but then he saw the Russian and knew it was Gogol. He must have been well over six feet tall, moving with authority as he towered over everyone else in the room. He strode directly to the door of the room where the rat races were held and inserted a key in the lock.

Sam Croydon, the Englishman Michael had met earlier, appeared from somewhere and asked Gogol, "Will there be racing tonight?"

The Russian pulled the door open. "I must inspect the damage first."

Michael could see there was surprisingly little of it. The position in which Kizim had been holding the clockwork rat as he wound it had directed the force of the small explosion into his body, either by accident or design.

Perhaps the bomber was a humanitarian who was careful not to injure anyone but his victim. Or perhaps he was careful simply because he knew he'd be standing close to Kizim when the bomb detonated.

"Who will operate the games?" Sam Croydon asked.

"The police have released Maksim," the Russian answered, and as if on cue the little Gypsy walked through the door. "Maksim!" Alexandra exclaimed, throwing her arms around him as one might greet a child. "You're free!"

"For the moment," he told her. "Vasili has warned me not to leave the city."

Croydon shook his hand. "Great to have you back, old chap. Now get those rats of yours running."

"Give us one hour to clean up the place," Gogol said. "Will that be enough, Maksim?"

"I don't know. There are bloody spots here which I must clean from the carpet as best I can."

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Gogol inspected them. "Hardly noticeable, especially with the room full of gamblers."

Michael had moved over to Maksim's side. "Vasili wouldn't have released you unless he was fairly certain of your innocence."

"Gogol wanted me out to run the races. Vasili does what he's told. Gogol doesn't care who killed Kizim as long as the races go on."

An hour later the bettors were lining up once more with their money and chips in hand. Maksim rang the bell and released his rats for their dash through the lighted tubes to the food at the other end. The races continued for more than an hour before Gogol announced there'd be just one more before the room closed. The Gypsy placed three rats into their holding boxes and said to Gogol, "There is one more clockwork rat remaining if you wish to use it."

"Go ahead."

"Do you want to wind it?"

The man in the black suit smiled and shook his head. "You will do that, little man." He took a step back, toward the door. Everyone in the room seemed to do likewise, though Michael was certain the remaining windup rat would have been examined by the police. Maksim shrugged and inserted the key into the furry toy, winding it briskly several times. He placed it on the bottom track and turned it on just as he released the other rats. Cheers went up from the spectators.

This time, to the surprise of many, the clockwork rat actually won the race by a nose. Gogol scowled at the dwarf, perhaps thinking that the previous manager had the right idea about winding the toy himself. "Not so tight next time," he cautioned Maksim in a low voice.

Michael followed the crowd into the club's regular casino and watched the more familiar varieties of gaming for an hour or so. He even tried his hand at roulette and won enough for those two plane tickets back home. He hoped he'd be able to use them. Gogol did not appear, and there was no opportunity to speak with him about the murdered man and the missing Yegor Wanovich. Finally, at midnight, he saw Alexandra departing through a side door, her shift at an end.

But there was something wrong.

Gogol had emerged from his office and signaled to two men in rumpled suits seated at the bar. They looked like former KGB

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agents, which wouldn't have surprised Michael. He'd heard that some of them had gone into organized crime. These two quickly followed the woman out the side door, and Michael hurried after them.

They caught up with her at her little black car, yanking her from the front seat before she could start the engine. Michael Vlado broke into a run, heading straight for them. He caught the first man by surprise, spinning him around and toppling him to the cindered parking lot. The second man was tougher, and he already had his hands on Alexandra's throat. Michael kicked him in the shin, then dragged him from the car as he relaxed his grip on her.

"Thank you," she managed to gasp.

"Let's get out of here, fast!" He pushed her over and took the wheel himself.

Both men were at the car as they pulled away, but if they were armed, neither used a weapon. "They're going for their car," Alexandra said, looking back. "They'll try to catch us."

The little Russian car was unfamiliar to Michael but he guided it along the residential streets, past old houses and high-rise apartments. "Why is Gogol after you?"

"Because I know what happened to Yegor Wanovich. He was killed by Kizim, probably on orders from Gogol."

"How did you find that out?"

"There were papers in Kizim's office at the club. I'd sneak in there during my breaks if he was busy somewhere else, hoping to find something on him. I wasn't the only one interested. Wanovich discovered the games were crooked and was blackmailing Kizim. I found records of the payments."

"Would anyone be surprised at crooked casino games in Moscow? Why would Wanovich take such a risk?"

"Because Kizim was fixing even the rat races, making it look as if Wanovich and his son were responsible." She peered through the windshield, squinting until she recognized the street. "Turn left here."

"How do you fix a rat race?" Michael wondered.

"By forcing them to swallow lead shots. It slows down the ones you want to lose."

It was a Gypsy trick. Michael wondered if Wanovich had taught it to Kizim in the first place. "I came here to rescue Wanovich's

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son, Maksim. His grandfather said Kizim was holding him in virtual slavery."

"This is my apartment," Alexandra said, indicating a brick building that probably dated from prerevolutionary days. "Come in with me until I know we haven't been followed."

The street was deserted in the midnight darkness, and Michael hurried after her. Inside the tiny apartment she turned on no lights but moved familiarly through the darkened room to the window. The glow from a streetlight enabled him to follow her progress until she stood just behind the curtains, staring down at the street. "Is anyone there?" he asked.

"No one yet."

The spring night had turned chilly in the Russian capital and he could see she was trembling, from the cold or from fear. He went to her and put his arm around her. "I can stay the night and sleep here on the sofa."

"If you get involved with me you may end up dead. Gogol is a hard man who'll do anything to keep control of the Club Nikolas."

He looked down at the street and saw a car drive slowly past the building. It might have been the one that followed them but he couldn't be sure. "This money Maksim's father is supposed to have stolen from the club — it was really the blackmail money, wasn't it?"

"I think so, yes." She turned and nestled her head beneath his chin. "Can you get me out of here? Out of Moscow?"

"I came here to get Maksim out."

"You are tall. I like that. Yegor only came up to my chin."

Michael stepped away from her, his attention suddenly drawn to the street. "I think they're down there." The car had returned and parked beneath a tree. As they watched, the two men emerged and started across the street.

"What will I do?" she asked.

"Is there a back way out of here?"

"Yes, into a courtyard that connects with the next apartment."

"Come on." He took her by the hand and led her into the hallway. She directed him to a rear staircase and then down to street level. They went through an outside door and found themselves in an enclosed courtyard. By the light of a single weak bulb he could make out the entrance to the apartment next door.

"Stop there!" a voice shouted. A spotlight hit them, pinning them like bugs. Then, shielding his eyes, Michael made out the

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figure of Lieutenant Ivan Vasili. He was holding a gun pointed at them.

"What do you want?" Michael asked.

"The woman. Surrender her and you are free to go."

"You're working for Gogol. He wants her dead."

"I am working for the state."

Behind him, Michael heard the door opening. The two men in the black suits came around on either side of them. The one Michael had kicked in the shin was holding a gun. "He is just another Gypsy," the man said. "I would know them anywhere. Let me shoot him!"

But Vasili held up his hand. "I think we must talk, Michael Vlado. You do not fully understand the situation. My men were not trying to abduct Alexandra outside the Club Nikolas tonight. They were trying to arrest her. We searched her apartment this evening and found explosives there."

At his side, Alexandra gasped. "Did you have a warrant for the search?" Michael asked.

"Warrant?" the detective repeated with a smile. Then he said to his men, "Bring them both along. He may have been working with her."

In the early morning hours Moscow police headquarters was even more depressing than on his earlier visit. That time Maksim had been the prisoner. Now it was Michael himself.

Seated alone in a holding cell while Vasili questioned Alexandra, he had time to consider the problem of Kizim's murder. By the time the detective came for him, many things had become clearer. "She will not talk without a lawyer," Vasili said. "Do you have anything to say?"

"Let me see her," Michael suggested.

The detective lit a cigarette and frowned. "What good will that do?"

"Can it do any harm? I'm sure you'll be listening to every word we say."

"All right." He unlocked the cell door. "She's in the first interrogation room."

Alexandra stood by a small window covered with heavy wire mesh, staring down at the street. She turned as Michael entered, surprised to see him. "Have they sent you now to question me?"

"No. I asked to speak with you."

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She sat down at the long table, crossing her hands in front of her. "Do you think that I killed Oleg Kizim?"

"I know that you killed him."

Her head jerked up. "What do you mean?"

Michael began to speak, feeling lonely and sad as he often did when remembering his childhood. "I must have been around ten years old at the time. My mother took me to visit a man named Caspian in a neighboring village. His wife had recently given birth, and that was the reason for our visit. I remember they let me hold the child in my arms. It was the first time I'd ever held a baby, because this was something boys rarely did. That baby was you, Sasha." Her head jerked up at the name. "You are Caspian's daughter and Maksim's mother."

She was silent for a long time, twisting her hands as she tried to find words. "How did you know?" she asked finally.

"You told me Yegor was gone many months before you started working at the club, yet tonight in your apartment you mentioned how short he was, that he only came up to your chin. If you didn't work together, you must have known him before. Then there was the business of Maksim's mother and father making fireworks for the clowns when they worked at the circus. You had the knowledge to make a small bomb, if you were Maksim's mother. Sitting here thinking about it just now, I remembered that the name Sasha is a form of Alexandra. I remembered how you greeted Maksim almost like a mother when he was released from police custody earlier."

"I suppose I should have admitted everything," she said, speaking in a tired voice.

"Tell me about it."

"Yegor and I split up when he insisted on taking Maksim to Moscow with him. He said there was no future for a Gypsy in Romania, especially a Gypsy dwarf. He'd heard everything was changing in Russia, and there were money-making opportunities in the capital. He was right, but those opportunities were in gambling and mob-related activities. I was so glad I'd taught my son how to read and write. He sent me letters from here, telling of their new jobs at the Club Nikolas. He made it sound like a glamorous place, which I suppose it is. The nightly rat races brought in much money for Oleg Kizim, especially after he started fixing the races by feeding the rats lead shot to weight them down."

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"That was when your husband began blackmailing him?"

She nodded. "And got himself killed. Leaving my son alone. Worse still, Kizim insisted he return the money his father had extorted. He refused to let Maksim leave the club until every ruble was repaid. My son became a virtual slave. That was when I decided to go to Moscow and be with him. I obtained the job as a barmaid and no one but Maksim knew I was his mother. Still, there seemed no way out for him. Even with my small income added to his, it would have taken us years to pay off my husband's debt. Kizim had paid him thousands before deciding to kill him."

"What did your husband do with all that money?"

"Maksim says he gambled it away, and spent it on drugs."

"So you killed Kizim."

She nodded. "Maksim knew I was planning something, but he didn't know what. I'd watched Kizim wind that clockwork rat many times and I knew exactly how he held it. I made certain the explosive charge was small enough that my son and the others in the room would not be harmed. I saw this as our way to freedom, but then Gogol took over as manager of the club and I knew things would never change."

"What made the police suspect you enough to search your room?"

"Lieutenant Vasili told me they found small traces of gunpowder in my locker at work. It must have come out of the bag in which I carried the toy rat to my apartment and back. It was there that I assembled the bomb." She gave a weak smile. "Perhaps I am a better mother than I am a criminal."

"I'd like to get Maksim out of here, if you'll allow it. Your father gave me money for two plane tickets back to Bucharest. I think now is the time to use them."

"Do it. Today if they'll let you. Perhaps some day I can join him."

He left her then and spoke to Ivan Vasili in the outer office. "Am I free to go?"

"Go," he said with a wave of his hand.

"What about Maksim?"

"Take the dwarf with you, but don't say I told you that."

"Will Gogol try to stop me?"

"I will handle him."

Michael and Maksim flew out of Domodedovo Airport on the afternoon flight to Bucharest. The rats stayed behind. ●

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Art by Todd Lockwood

THE LAST OF MISS TRIMM . . . ?

by Donald Olson

I've decided to close the shop — sell it if possible — and move back to Baltimore. Should anyone ask why, I'll give Mother's health as the reason; she really does need someone now that George and Mary have moved to the Coast. And let's face it, this venture, like most of those inspired by romantic whims, was doomed from the start. This city already has too many secondhand bookstores. An interesting way to make very little money, as old Miles Worthing warned me himself when I took over from him shortly before his death.

My always having been of a somewhat nervous disposition, this Drusilla Trimm affair has left me in a constant state of agitation;

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that's the real reason I want to get away. Call it paranoia, but I have this fear of the police or the papers (I'm thinking of Billy White here) somehow linking me to what happened and holding me at least indirectly responsible.

I first saw her on one of those dreary wet days when not even one of the homeless wandered into the shop seeking shelter from the rain. I was at my desk in the rear examining the steel engravings in an early edition of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* when I happened to look up and saw her peering in the window. Long, lifeless, carrot-colored hair, a narrow pale face, dark glasses, tan raincoat buttoned to the throat, a green silk scarf around her neck.

I waited for her to pass on, but when I again glanced up she was still there, seemingly oblivious of the rain. Then she looked to the right, to the left, and across the street before approaching the door. As she entered I noticed that below the raincoat her legs were bare and colorless, made more so by the shocking-pink ankle socks and sodden gray tennis shoes.

I allowed her to browse for a minute before offering assistance.

"Help you with something, miss?"

She looked older at close hand, lines in her forehead and a bruised look about her mouth, as if she were in the habit of biting her lips till they bled.

"They said this was the place. I don't see it." Her voice was soft but with a faint note of irritation.

"Something special?" I asked.

She pulled from her pocket a dog-eared piece of newsprint and handed it to me. Her fingers were skeletally thin and ringless. It was a clipping of Billy White's brief article about the "black museum." Billy's an acquaintance of mine who writes a column for the *News*. I'd persuaded him to print the squib in hopes it would draw business to the shop.

"Oh, I see, yes. You mean the museum. It's through there." I showed her the door into the annex, the sign in black gothic letters: *Mementos of Murder*.

The glass cases were from a defunct delicatessen which had once occupied the adjoining premises and now displayed a modest, miscellaneous collection of memorabilia relating to notorious murder cases of bygone years, acquired from God knows what sources by old Mr. Worthing. Among them were Dr. Crippen's diploma from the Ophthalmic Hospital of New York, dated 1883, and a sepia photograph of Robert James inscribed to his wife, the wife he murdered, thereby earning the distinction of being the last

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man to be hanged in California. There were three letters written to silent-film star Mabel Normand by William Desmond Taylor, victim in one of Hollywood's most famous unsolved murder cases. There were items associated with Harry Thaw, Loeb and Leopold, Ruth Snyder and Henry Judd Array, and a dozen or so others.

Miles Worthing had been proud of his little "black museum" but I could never share his enthusiasm and had no interest in augmenting the collection.

The young woman remained in the museum less than five minutes before confronting me at my desk.

"You can buy stuff like that, mister?" she asked.

"Like what?"

She glanced at the annex sign. "Mementos of murder."

"The previous owner did. Actually, nothing's come my way."

"I've got something."

"Indeed? What might that be?" My tone was lightly interested, disguising a dim awareness of there possibly being something mentally off-key about the woman.

"His violin."

"Whose violin?"

"Adonn Trimm's."

When I didn't immediately respond the note of irritation sharpened. "He was my father. My name is Drusilla Trimm."

"Sorry. The name's not familiar."

At this her face assumed a look of injured pride. She pulled off her dark glasses, revealing greenish-gray eyes of a surprising beauty. "It was in all the papers. A famous case. They were both murdered. Mother and Daddy."

Adonn Trimm? The name still didn't register. "When was this?"

"August tenth, nineteen sixty-four. It was in all the papers."

Even had it been in the Baltimore papers I wouldn't have seen it, being only seven at the time and not in the habit of reading newspapers.

I told her that Mr. Worthing, being an aficionado of murder, would have been familiar with the case.

"Ask him," she said. "He'll tell you."

"I'm afraid he's dead."

"I must sell it," she said. "I need the money. I want to go away. Will you buy it?"

As if the ghost of Miles Worthing were whispering in my ear urging me to show a little interest, I told her again that I was not familiar with the case but would make inquiries. "I can call you."

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"No phone."

"Then why don't you call me. Later in the week. Let me give you my number."

I handed her one of my cards, for some reason eager to be rid of her. Her manner suggested the arrogant willfulness of a spoiled child, and I found her aggressive, unblinking gaze disconcerting

"I'll take a thousand dollars for it," she said. "Not a penny less."

"For the violin."

"Yes. It was his. I can prove it."

I thanked her for coming in and once more promised to make inquiries, a promise I regretted as soon as she'd left. At the same time, I was mildly curious to know if the woman was some sort of crank and decided to give Billy White a call at the *News*.

He remembered the case at once. "Made quite a sensation at the time. Adonn Trimm. Had a respectable career as a fiddler. Played with a number of symphony orchestras in the East. What intrigued the public was the way he and his wife were murdered. Strangled with his own violin strings. Case was never solved."

"Was there a daughter?"

"Believe so, yes."

"Drusilla?"

"Could be. She was a kid at the time. Discovered the bodies. So what's your interest?"

For some reason I felt reluctant to mention Drusilla Trimm's visit, at least for the time being. I mumbled something about coming across a reference to the case in an old book.

I certainly wasn't about to invest in a violin once belonging to a murder victim in a case that was yesterday's news, and I hoped I'd heard the last of Miss Trimm. Yet I wasn't surprised when she phoned the very next day. I told her, yes, I'd made inquiries about the case but wasn't interested in making an offer for the violin.

"Without even seeing it?" she demanded tartly. "It's not just any old fiddle. You could say it was the murder weapon."

Considering that she was talking about the murder of her own parents, I found something disagreeably callous in the woman's greed and apparent lack of sentiment. When I repeated that I wasn't interested her bullying tone was replaced by a note of urgent supplication. "Do me a favor. Please? At least come and look at it. And listen, I can tell you things, things I never told anyone, even the police."

It might have been owing to Miles Worthing's spectral interference, if I believed in such things, or out of simple curiosity, in any

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event, I finally agreed to look at the instrument. What harm could it do? She gave me the address of a hotel on the far West Side and after dinner that evening I took the subway across town. The hotel turned out to be one of those tawdry relics one associates with smoldering sexual liaisons of an illicit nature, or with hapless transients heading nowhere but down.

Drusilla Trimm was wearing the same pink socks and a ratty cardigan over a soiled baggy smock. The first thing she said was: "Got a cigarette? I'm fresh out."

"Sorry, I don't smoke."

"Oh well, no have can't do. What's wrong, something smell funny?"

"No, no, I—"

"Place is a dump. I can't wait to get out of here. You too, eh? So let's not waste time."

A big brown-leather suitcase lay on the floor and a violin case on the bed. Drusilla snapped it open, revealing a fine-looking instrument seemingly in mint condition except for two missing strings.

"No," she said, as if assuming I'd drawn the obvious conclusion and not wishing to deceive me, "the missing strings aren't the ones the murderer used. I did that. Makes it more interesting. And who's to know? The strings used to strangle them were kept in a cabinet in the music room. You said you'd made inquiries."

"A few, yes."

"I was there, you know, in my little bed. Mother was in her room. Daddy was asleep on an old fainting couch in the music room. He often slept there after one of their fights."

"Fights?"

"They quarreled a lot, Mother and Daddy. Which didn't mean they didn't love each other, in their own way. But that Leda was always a thorn in Mother's side."

"Leda?"

"Leda *Ganeiro*. Daddy's accompanist. Piano. They gave recitals."

"Name sounds familiar," I said, not recalling in what context.

"Leda went to Europe soon after the murders. Made a name for herself over there, so she stayed. Now she's come back for a farewell concert at the Aeolian Hall Saturday night. They were lovers, you know, Daddy and Leda."

Stooping with her back to me, she fished a photograph out of the suitcase. A formal pose: Adonn Trimm holding the fiddle to his chin, a striking woman in a white evening dress at the piano.

"Pretty, wasn't she?" said Drusilla, drily ungracious. "But a real bitch offstage. She wanted Daddy to dump us and marry her."

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"You knew all this? You were just a kid."

Under the not unpleasingly arched nose her lips puckered into a secret smile. "Children sense things. But I never knew the truth until years later when I read Leda's letters to Daddy. That's when I learned he'd been trying to end the affair. I guess Leda got too hot to handle."

She now drew my attention to a flowery medallion painted just below the air holes on the violin and encircling the words *Adonn Trimm. Il Maestro. Roma 1952.*

"An Italian craftsman made the violin for him when Daddy was at the height of his powers. . . . God, I'd kill for a smoke." She started nosing about the room, even looking under the bed.

"Odd choice of weapon," I remarked.

Abandoning her search, Drusilla sat down on the bed beside the violin, stroking its polished wood with spidery fingers. "Depends on who did it, and why. Cops said robbery. Idiots. Just because a few trinkets were missing. I could tell them who did it."

Was this what she'd hinted at on the phone? She met my politely sceptical look with a defiant thrust of her jaw. "Leda, of course."

"Was she even a suspect?"

"Oh no. She *purported* to have an alibi. Baloney. She had a key to the house. She could have sneaked in late at night. She knew where the violin strings were kept, and she had the strength to strangle two sleeping people."

"Did the police know about the love affair?"

"Nobody knew, except Mother."

"They weren't shown the letters?"

"My grandmother suppressed them. She idolized her son. Daddy's reputation was more important to her than who killed him. I was going to burn them after she died, but I didn't. Anyway, where were we? I think a thousand dollars is a fair price."

"It might have been—thirty years ago."

"Why not now?"

"Miss Trimm, I don't wish to offend you, but your father was not a *famous* violinist. He was murdered. The murder was never solved. Most people probably don't even remember the case. Of course, the violin has a certain intrinsic value. You could no doubt sell it. But for a thousand bucks? Not likely."

Her fine eyes, which had been brimming with expectation as we'd talked, now flashed with anger. "So how much *will* you pay?"

"I'm sorry. I'm simply not prepared to make you an offer."

"I don't *know* anyone else who buys murder mementos."

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"Actually, I don't either. Collect such things, I mean. That was Worthing's interest, not mine. I'm not even sure he'd have bought it."

"Because no one remembers Daddy? Because the case is closed?"

"Frankly, yes."

She seemed about to argue, but then the angry look subsided into an expression of sly calculation, as if an idea had suddenly come to mind and revived her hopes. "But what if Leda Ganeiro confessed to the murders? It would be big news again, right?"

I tried not to smile, not wishing to provoke her anger again. "Is that even remotely likely? You haven't a shred of evidence. It's pure speculation, long after the event. Who would believe you?"

Drusilla twisted a strand of carrot-colored hair around her finger and pulled it taut, as if demonstrating how Ganiero's strong pianist's fingers might have employed those violin strings with murderous effect. "Leda wasn't the sort of woman to be jilted and laugh it off. . . . If she did confess, you'd give me the money? You could tell the papers about the violin. Everybody'd come to see it."

Clearly, the force of her obsession had perverted whatever common sense she might ordinarily have possessed, while at that point all I wanted was to escape from Drusilla Trimm and the smelly squalor of that room. The quickest way to do that, I reasoned, was to humor her, as one might humor a madman's whims to shorten one's visit to the asylum.

"Oh yes," I said recklessly, "then I'd buy it."

"For a thousand dollars?"

She could have said a million and I'd have agreed. What difference did it make? "Yes, but tell me, how do you propose getting her to confess?"

Again the deep, cunning look. "She doesn't know those letters still exist."

"I'd hardly call that a threat. Thirty-year-old love letters?"

"Oh well, I'll think of something."

"Miss Trimm, take my advice. Forget all about it. Why risk making a fool of yourself?"

Nothing I said now seemed to offend her. It was as if she could already see the blazing headlines. "I'll risk it," she said. "I'll risk *anything*. I need the money. God, I can't wait to get out of this filthy city. Maybe I'll go to California. I've always wanted to see California." And then she added on a plaintive note, "You sure you don't have a cigarette?"

I left the hotel certain that this time I'd really heard the last of Miss Trimm.

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❖ ❖ ❖

Life should have taught me never to be certain about anything. Billy White called me shortly after midnight on Saturday.

"You must be psychic," he said. "Or was it just coincidence you asked me about the Trimm case the other day?"

"What are you talking about?" His call had awakened me and I was still groggy.

"I'm covering the story."

"What story?"

"Don't you listen to the news? Leda Ganeiro was murdered tonight."

I was instantly wide awake. "Say that again?"

"The concert pianist. Stabbed to death in her dressing room at the Aeolian."

"Good God. But what's it got to do with Adonn Trimm?"

"She was Trimm's accompanist thirty years ago. Maybe his lover. They found an old photograph beside the body. Leda and Trimm. Signed *With Endless Love.*"

My brain was spinning. "Has anyone been charged?"

"Not yet. No witnesses. Someone must have slipped into her dressing room and stabbed her. Quite a story, eh? Trimm's unsolved murder thirty years ago, and now Leda Ganeiro."

Words and images formed a dizzy pattern in my mind. The notion was too outlandish. Drusilla Trimm might be mad, of course, but surely not that mad, not homicidal. Still, the logic of it seemed inescapable. Drusilla needed money. I'd promised to give it to her, promised to buy the violin if public interest in that long-forgotten murder case were to be revived.

Could murder have been the seemingly inconceivable consequence of that reckless promise? What was it Drusilla had said? *I'll risk anything.*

I thought of not going to the shop that morning, fearful of Drusilla showing up once the story hit the papers. What would I do? What *should* I do? Go to the police? The thought of embroiling myself in the affair was repugnant to me. What if the police and the papers learned of my "deal" with Drusilla? What if she were arrested and led them to believe I *knew* what she planned to do?

Steeling myself for unimaginable horrors, I did open the shop, following my daily routine in a state of nerve-quivering suspense. I jumped every time the door opened. The story did, of course, make the headlines, but as the day wore on and Drusilla neither appeared nor phoned, my feeling of panic gradually subsided

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until by late afternoon I'd all but convinced myself I was worrying needlessly. It had all been a bizarre coincidence, my meetings with Drusilla and the pianist's murder.

Furthermore, if by some chance Drusilla *had* killed Leda, it could only have been in a rage after failing to frighten her with those less-than-incriminating letters. Should that have been the case, Drusilla would have fled the city at once, money or no money.

The next day's papers reported no fresh developments in the case. That evening I called Billy White and asked casually if he was still on the story. He said he was.

"In fact," he confided gleefully, "I'm doing a feature on it for the weekend edition. I lucked onto a treasure trove of material."

"Oh? Anything about the daughter, Drusilla?"

"Drusilla Trimm died three months ago."

"What?"

"I got the whole story from her cousin, a woman named Chloe Dymond. She came to see me at the office. Said someone had given her my name. She had a satchel full of juicy material. Torrid love letters from Trimm to Leda Ganeiro. Family photos. Knew the whole background. Seems Drusilla Trimm never really recovered from the trauma of her parents' murders. Her grandmother and this cousin took care of her for years at some little place up the river. Granny died, then the money ran out, and Drusilla committed suicide. The Dymond woman offered to sell the paper all the material and everything she knew about the family situation. We made a deal. She drove a hard bargain but we figured it was worth the money."

My mind was racing, trying to take all this in and make some kind of sense of it. If Drusilla was dead, it must have been the cousin who contacted me. What I'd told her about the violin's having no sales value must have planted in her head an idea of how to cash in on the story in a much bigger way.

"Are you going to see her again?" I asked Billy.

"No chance. By now she's probably in California. That's where she wanted to go."

"This cousin," I said, "what did she look like?"

"Why, do you know her?"

"No, I just thought the name sounded familiar."

"She said she'd done some acting. Small-time stuff." Billy laughed. "She was quite a looker. Carrot-colored hair, done up real fancy. Willowy figure. Smashing eyes. Quite a dish. A real sharp cookie, and dressed to kill." ●

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The Girls of Winter

by Seymour Shubin

Joe was the first of us to die. I remember I was in the bedroom, wondering which earrings to put on (the six of us were going to a show), trying first one and then another at the vanity mirror, when the phone rang and Mack called through the open door from the living room, "I'll take it." And a couple of minutes later he was in the doorway, his face drained of blood.

"Annie." It came out like a groan. "Joe's dead."

"Oh no." He came over to me as I stood up.

"He . . . he was hit by a car."

"Oh no," and I remember sinking back on the chair.

It was the thing all of us had feared. Had known had to come. Not that *Joe* would die. That the beautiful thing we had going for us would one day begin shattering apart.

The six of us were from different parts of the North—Kate and Joe from Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, Lily and Don from New York—Long Island—Mack and I from suburban Philadelphia. We met around the pool here in Florida, somehow attracted to each other out of all the other people, mostly seniors like ourselves, on their lounge chairs in the sun. I think it was Kate and I who met first—this was her third day of not smoking, she announced in her husky voice, after forty-seven years. Then Lily, who was sitting nearby,

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introduced herself: Chubby, almost-sausagelike, she turned out to have been a ballroom dancer and a champion swimmer somewhere. We talked women's talk — beauty parlors (I was the only one who'd let herself go white), our grown children, a few ailments. And during this, the men drifted over and soon were talking about golf — at which point we girls chimed in; we all loved golf — and the businesses they'd retired from. We all had condos in the same building (there were two in this complex) and in fact had bought them in the same month, though on different floors. That night we went out together for the first time — for stone crabs. I definitely remember that.

And that was the beginning, five years ago. We played golf together, we played bridge together, we went out to dinner and shows together, we took a ten-day tour of France together, even had keys to one another's apartments in case of an emergency. And though we were "snowbirds," drifting back north in late spring to our homes and families, away from the summer heat of Florida, our real lives, in a big sense, our independence, our freedom from our lifelong responsibilities, were here. Going north became a duty.

But now the first piece of us (it was as though all of us were one) was gone.

Joe was buried up North, and we went there for the funeral. Kate had no idea if she would be coming back; in fact, her daughter started talking already about Kate moving in with her family. And that struck me as terribly sad. Kate was so independent, but sixty-seven must have seemed like a million to her daughter. And already I saw a change in her that seemed to go beyond the natural impact of her grief. Her whole bearing had changed — she'd always been thin, but now she looked skeletal — and for the first time I saw her always-coiffed blond hair unkempt and opening to gray.

We hoped she'd come back, and three weeks later she did. And then a new kind of sadness started. I made dinner for all of us the first night, and though Kate was fine most of the evening, we all knew she was holding back. We were all holding back. Then she began crying, motioning to us that it would be all right, she'd be all right, and she sniffed and tried to smile, and we all took long quivering breaths. And I cried that night, in bed, Mack holding me.

"Hold me tighter," I remember saying.

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The second evening the five of us went out to dinner, and it was even worse. It wasn't that she cried or anything like that. It was just that she seemed to *know* something. And we knew it too. That it wasn't the same. That even though we all loved her as much as ever, it was different now. The balance of the group was gone. Something. I felt terribly guilty about it. And I must admit that I even felt a little relieved when she said at the pool soon after that, no, she couldn't make it that evening—we were planning to go see jai alai. And the following day was the first we saw her with Mona.

Mona was someone we'd barely talked to. She seemed simply shy, almost a part of the background. Just about the only thing we knew about her was that she'd been a widow for about three years. But that day Kate, after a little wave to us, sat with her at the far side of the pool. And that night we saw her driving out of the parking lot with Mona. And I remember saying something to Lily about how fortunate it was that they'd tied up together—that each was good for the other, that not only did they have something that bound them together, but Mona didn't drive.

Which brings up something about Joe. He used to be funny about driving. He not only would rarely let Kate drive, but in his big, gruff way he wouldn't let Mack or Don drive. Not that he could have stopped them if they insisted on using their cars, but he enjoyed driving and maybe it was easier for them to give in and just sit and be chauffeured.

Anyway, now it was Lily and Don, Mack and me. And I guess nature has its way, for though we missed Kate and Joe, it was as though this was the way it had to be. And we had no reason to feel guilty about Kate. She and Mona would occasionally come over to us at the pool, or once in a while we'd play cards together, but it became a kind of unspoken thing that we wouldn't be going out together anymore, wouldn't play golf together. And she herself didn't seem to miss it. Not at all; she and Mona were a real twosome. They seemed to be out every night. And not only did Kate seem to enjoy the freedom of driving, all of us could tell at the first glance that Henri was doing her hair again.

"I'm so happy they found each other," Lily said.

And the four of us, I must say, had a great time together. It was as though we'd been the real core of the group. And there was less quarreling now. Well, I don't mean quarreling exactly, but Joe liked to have his way in a lot of things in addition to driving. *No,*

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let's not go there. I don't think Mack or I, or even Lily and Don, ever said that once: We were willing to go along with the crowd. But *Joe,* if Joe wanted to go one place instead of the other, it was hard getting him to change. And Kate, that ninny, we used to say, always went along with whatever he said, never said no. Like he could never do anything wrong. Like she didn't have a brain in her head when she was with him.

So we had a good time, the four of us. Now Mack and Don shared the driving (in fact, I always drove Lily when the two of us had to go someplace—her vision was still cloudy despite cataract operations) and we even went to places we hadn't gone to before, like one special restaurant Joe had absolutely detested.

But it was only eight months later that Mack had a heart attack.

"Ann." An urgent cry from the next pillow in the middle of the night, and after trying to assure him it might be nothing, indigestion, I was quickly dialing 911, and soon after was walking quickly alongside the gurney as neighbors along the hallway stood in nightclothes in their doorways, watching with concern and pity.

But he came out of it fine—physically, that is. However, he'd become extremely nervous, only wanted to stay in the apartment, had to be coaxed out of it. And naturally I had visions of him being gone, and it absolutely terrified me. Kate came to see us only once—and I must tell you I was glad it wasn't more. She was, although she said everything right, a reminder of what could lie ahead of me. And I'm going to give her credit for sensing this herself. But Lily and Don were so great; I don't know what I'd have done without them. They not only said the right words, but they talked Mack into going out to dinner, then a movie. And Don even got him to go golfing.

But then just like that, he died. No, no, I didn't mean to confuse you. Not Mack. Don. Of a heart attack. The poor little guy just dropped dead in his own living room.

And it's strange how one of the things that stands out in my mind is that when we went down to Lily's apartment to try to comfort her, to *be* with her, it was the first time in a month that I saw Kate. She was there with Mona.

Don's death set Mack back tremendously. His nerves just went. It was as though every sniffle he got was going to kill him. He wouldn't even go down to the pool anymore. He dreaded even hav-

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ing me go out to do food shopping. I had to be in his sight or within calling distance. And his mind was also working on his physique. He'd always been a sturdy man, with his hair, at seventy-three, as thick and black as it had been when he was a kid. But over the past few months he must have lost thirty pounds. He'd become bent over, almost hollow-chested. And his hair was even beginning to turn gray.

Ann, Annie!

That's all he did was call me.

Do this for me, do that. Would you pick that up, bring me that?

It would have been different if he was really sick. But I must have had him over to the doctor once a week with a new complaint. Oh, the doctor found a few things. His feet were in fact a little numb — peripheral neuropathy, but it wouldn't kill him, shouldn't even keep him from doing things. Lots of elderly people had it. And his blood pressure was somewhat labile, high one minute, normal the next; but the doctor was holding off medication for a while—possible side effects Mack confided in me when I walked him out to the car, one of which could be a downer on sexuality (which had me rolling my eyes—*sexuality,* what was *that?).*

I asked more than once if he wanted to move back North. But no. He didn't want Sally, the only one of our three children who still lived in Pennsylvania, to start hovering over us, imprisoning us. We'd both, he said, find ourselves in nursing homes.

It was the only thing we agreed on. But still it went on—

Ann, Annie!

And that's when, somewhere during this time, God forgive me, I began to hate him. I mean, not just hate him. *Loathe* him. His face, his voice, his almost always sitting like a cripple in a chair when he wasn't spending most of the day in bed.

And meanwhile Kate and Mona and now Lily—

They were a team. The few times I went down to the pool just to *be* with other people, if even for a few minutes, I'd see them sitting together. And on the few evenings I was downstairs or was standing out on the patio, I would see them driving off together, Kate behind the wheel.

I must say, they asked me on several occasions to join them, but instead of appreciating it, I hated them for it. They had to know I meant what I said, that I *couldn't* go. In fact I had a little quarrel with Kate over it.

"Why can't you?" she insisted. "We're only going to the movies."

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"I just can't."

"Why don't you hire a nurse? Someone?"

"Kate," I said reprovingly.

"I mean it. We have fun. How long do you *have* to have fun? Don't you want to?"

"Of course I want to."

"Well then."

"I can't. I'm telling you I can't."

And that evening was the first time I wished he would die. *Wanted* him dead.

I remember standing in the doorway, staring at him in bed. And I remember thinking: The son of a bitch is going to live forever. But oh, how I hated myself for it.

And then three weeks later, I found him dead.

I had just left him for maybe fifteen minutes. Lily had called me down to her apartment to show me something, and I didn't know whether to go, but then I looked in the bedroom and saw he was asleep and I hurried out to the hall and took the elevator down to the third floor. She showed me a few things of her deceased mother's that one of her sisters had brought over for her, including a beautiful inlaid brooch.

So you can imagine my horror and guilt when I came back to the apartment and found him still in bed, on his back as before, his eyes closed, but his mouth not only wide open but eerily *slack.* And I knew he was gone even before my quivering hand gingerly touched his cheek.

And so help me, as I backed away before turning and running to the phone, just about all I could think of was that I'd wished it on him. And that it would all come out, would somehow make it murder.

We go to dinner, we go to shows, we play bridge together, we even play nine holes of golf together. I even find Mona, whom I never really liked—though the fact is I never knew her—I even find her very nice.

It was hard to begin going out. You know, the guilt, even though Mack's death was put to another heart attack. But the girls said stop it, you can't live like that. And after about two weeks I was even the one who drove. It just came about naturally. Kate, who'd driven the evening before, called me and said, "Do you mind taking your car?"

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"Of course not."

When the four of us were in the car, Kate explained, "It's the damn arthritis in my knees. It's gotten so bad I can barely work the pedals."

I don't know if it first pierced my head then, but it came on me fully a week later, as we were driving to dinner: that I was the only one here who *could* drive. I glanced over at Kate, with her bony face and her carefully done blond hair, and she somehow sensed it and looked at me with a smile. Then I glanced in the rearview mirror at the two back there, chatting away almost nose-to-nose.

I don't know. Maybe I'm wrong, although it's true I'm the only one who's been driving ever since. But once in a while I think: that call from Lily to come down. And that Lily, Kate, and I had never given up the keys to one another's apartments. And was there anything to the fact, as I began to wonder, that the pillow next to the one he was lying on, my pillow, lay there at a slight angle?

But I have finally put those thoughts away. After all, how could you think it of friends you love and who love you? And who need you as much as you need them? ●

"Why can't you be nice to me? I've given you the best years of my life."

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When Dorothy Came

by Mignon F. Ballard

When Dorothy came my world rinsed its face in sunshine and went dancing. My mother's younger sister was close to thirty at the time, but she looked eighteen. She wore her dark, wavy hair in a sassy bob, dressed in bright, bold skirts that swirled, and had a different pair of earrings for each day of the week.

The evening Dorothy disappeared she wore dangling copper sunflowers and a purple-splashed dress. It was the summer I turned seven. Thirty years ago.

Dorothy had gone to a party the night before she vanished, and as soon as I woke the next morning, I scooted out of bed and ran into Dorothy's sunny room at the end of the hall to hear all about it. The two of us had established a routine: I would pounce on her bed and giggle, and Dorothy would slowly stretch, groan, and burrow under the covers, ignoring me. But if I sat there long enough, she'd eventually plop her pillow against the shiny tufted headboard, light a long, skinny cigarette, and tell me about the handsome men she'd danced with, the fast cars they drove, and the exotic things they'd had to eat—like lobster bisque and veal scaloppine—and crazy things too: snails and frog legs, and oysters that weren't even cooked!

But that morning her bed was empty. Although the open closet door revealed a scattered trail of clothing and the usual jumble of

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disarray, the green quilted spread was undisturbed.

I raced downstairs to find my father's sister Evelyn pouring batter onto a sizzling griddle. Pancakes. A tempting contrast to her usual gray offering of oatmeal and toast, and they smelled wonderful, but I wasn't hungry.

"Where's Dorothy?" I asked.

"Wash your hands and sit down." Aunt Evelyn frowned at my feet. "I told you to get in the tub last night, Emily Jane Carstairs. You could grow a crop between those toes." She filled a tall glass with milk and thumped it down in front of me. I hated milk.

"Where's Dorothy?" I asked again.

"I don't know. Your Aunt Dorothy didn't come home last night. Still out playing cards somewhere, I reckon." Aunt Evelyn disapproved of Dorothy's fast-living ways. Now she turned back to the stove and layered three round, brown pancakes on my plate.

Aunt Evelyn had been my legal guardian since my parents were killed driving home from a football game two years before — took the curve too fast, the coroner said. Mom and Dad parted company in the air, their convertible landed in Logan's Pond, and I ended up with Aunt Evelyn.

My father's sister was the practical one, the responsible one, the one the courts decided would give me a stable upbringing. An angular, sallow woman, Aunt Evelyn had been married briefly to a man she referred to only as "your poor Uncle Martin," who died young of rheumatic fever. His pale likeness sat on the dresser next to my aunt's bed.

We lived in a rambling old house that had belonged to my mother and was supposed to come to Dorothy if she ever decided to settle down. Dorothy's work as an actress took her all over the place, sometimes for a week here, two weeks there. Why, she even spent a month in California for a bit part in a movie with Gregory Peck! And one time she showed me the pale pink scar on the inside of her left arm from an injury when a footlight exploded. In between she modeled — mostly for catalogues and newspaper ads — but once my aunt was the "Perky Plus" girl for Glamoureen Cosmetics and her picture was on the inside cover of just about every magazine in the country. I lived for her to come back home.

And now she'd up and taken off again. Dorothy's visits were infrequent, but it wasn't like her not to say goodbye. This time she'd promised to take me on a picnic. We would play in the creek all day and eat nothing but candy, she had said.

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When Dorothy came I had ice cream almost every day and painted my toenails purple. I dressed up in silver sandals and wore flowers in my hair. And Dorothy never told me to sit up straight, eat my broccoli, or not to run with a sucker in my mouth. And she didn't make me wear pinafores.

Aunt Evelyn sewed for just about everybody in town and from the leftover scraps, she made me pinafores — all from the same pattern. She plaited my hair in two stiff braids that stuck out like puppies' tails and made me go to bed before dark.

And although she never came right out and said so, I knew Aunt Evelyn couldn't stand Dorothy. Dorothy ran with "an unsavory bunch," Aunt Evelyn said, and she predicted dire consequences for anyone who stayed out to "all hours" drinking, dancing, and playing cards for money. But I still couldn't understand why she acted so peculiar when she told me Dorothy was gone—like she knew something I didn't, and it wasn't good.

The next day they found Dorothy's yellow Volkswagen in a tangle of underbrush by the river with a suicide note on the seat. Lloyd Jamison, who had been with my aunt that night, said she'd acted kind of quiet — but Dorothy was known to be moody — and the handwriting looked like hers — only neater. Like she was trying to make a last good impression, Evelyn said. But even at seven, I knew my Aunt Dorothy didn't care a fig about what kind of impression she made.

Searchers found one of her gold sandals in weeds at the edge of the river and the other mired in mud a few yards downstream; a ragged strip of her skirt turned up snagged on submerged debris about a mile farther downstream. But they never did find Dorothy.

I cried every day for a week, and when Evelyn tried to give some of Dorothy's things to the church clothing drive, I locked myself in her room and buried the key in a box of clove-scented bath powder. Aunt Evelyn had to call the fire department to get me out, and she was so upset her nose turned strawberry red and her voice went all trembly and high.

"What *am* I going to do with you, Emily Jane?" she said. "If only your poor Uncle Martin had lived! You're just going to have to get control of yourself and face the facts: Your Aunt Dorothy is gone . . . and she's not coming back."

At the memorial service a few weeks later, soft ladies came up and patted me, told me what a brave girl I was and how sorry they were my Aunt Dorothy was gone. "Passed on," they said—

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which is supposed to make being dead sound a little gentler. It doesn't. I didn't believe them anyway. I knew Dorothy wouldn't go off and leave me like that. Not if she had a choice.

There were whispers, of course, but because of Aunt Evelyn's insulation, I didn't become aware of what was said until I went to my first slumber party. I came home early, crying.

"Emily Jane! What on earth is wrong? Are you sick?" Aunt Evelyn felt my forehead.

"They said Dorothy was bad," I told her. "Millicent Sprague said Dorothy killed herself because she was having a baby and didn't have a husband. And that hateful Rebecca Avery said she was probably drunk when she went in the river and didn't even know what she was doing. Rebecca told me her mama said Dorothy never came home anyway unless she ran out of money and wanted something. That's not so!" I stood on the bottom step in our big old downstairs hall and kicked my rolled-up sleeping bag clear across the floor. "Dorothy came to see *me*. She loved me."

Aunt Evelyn looked as if she was fighting a battle inside herself —and losing. "Yes, Emily Jane. I think she did."

"And was she?" I asked.

"Was she what?"

"Was she going to have a baby?"

"Certainly not!" my aunt said.

I wiped my eyes and tried to remember Dorothy's smile when she teased me, the funny way she laughed. I thought of how she'd used up all our adhesive bandages on my doll with the broken leg, and it made me want to cry all over again. "Do you think Dorothy was bad, Aunt Evelyn?" I asked.

My aunt looked so sad I thought she was going to cry too. "I think you'd better forget Millicent and Rebecca and find somebody else to play with," she said. And she went in her room and shut the door.

It must've been a year or so after that when I began to wonder about what was in the toolshed. It was not that I liked going in there — it was dank and dirty, and disgusting things scurried across the hard dirt floor when you opened the door. I avoided it whenever possible. But one October afternoon when I was eleven or twelve, I was helping Aunt Evelyn plant chrysanthemums by the front steps when we ran out of peat moss.

"I think there's a sack in the toolshed," I said. "I'll go look."

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"No!" My aunt stumbled to her feet. "I don't like you going in there. There are poisons, pesticides . . ."

"I'm not going to eat them," I said, laughing.

But Aunt Evelyn didn't smile. "You might forget and leave the door open, and you know how the Boldings are about that blessed cat! We'd never live it down. Besides, you don't know where to find it."

I thought it kind of peculiar that my aunt was so concerned about the neighbor's cat when more than once I'd seen her chase it from the porch with a broom. But Aunt Evelyn had developed some curious practices in the last year or two, so I just added this to the list. Only a few weeks before we'd eaten bean soup every night for what seemed like forever, and I took peanut butter sandwiches every day for lunch. Then one day I came home to find my aunt in a silent, snappish mood, and the pretty cherry rocking chair that had been her grandmother's was gone.

The day after the toolshed incident, I came home to find a shiny new padlock on the outbuilding door. "I don't want any accidents," my aunt said. After that, if we needed anything from the toolshed, she took a key from her pocket and opened the door herself.

In the years that followed, Aunt Evelyn began a custom-made curtain business which she operated out of our house, working long, hard hours that eventually ruined her eyesight and left her permanently stooped. Once during this time I came home early from my Saturday babysitting to find her napping on the day bed with a damp cloth over her eyes and a cup of tea, grown cold, beside her. I was soon to graduate from high school, and between school activities and my afternoon job at a local bookstore, we rarely saw each other. It touched me to see her lying there looking broken and old, knowing she had been faithfully putting money by so that I could commute to college the next fall.

It was April and the flower beds, untouched since September, were choked with weeds. In a cubbyhole of my aunt's writing desk I found the key to the toolshed door. This I could do for her.

The rush of dark air that greeted me put my good intentions on hold, and my earlier doubts overwhelmed me as soon as I opened the sagging door. What was it in this foul old shed that my aunt didn't want me to see? In an hour of searching through rusting tools, shelves cluttered with flowerpots, fruit jars, ancient cookie tins, and about twenty years' accumulation of paint cans, I found nothing out of the ordinary.

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Later, when my aunt woke to find me chopping wild onions from her perennial bed, I thought I recognized a brief moment of fear in her eyes before she spoke.

"Well, that is an improvement, Emily Jane. Just be sure you lock that shed when you're through and put the key back in my desk."

The next time I looked there, the key was gone.

We never talked about her strange obsession with the toolshed, or about Dorothy. Aunt Evelyn eventually sold the furniture in Dorothy's room and used the space to display her handiwork. In the years that were to follow, I came to acknowledge Dorothy's death, but some small part of me couldn't—or wouldn't—accept that she had done that awful thing to herself.

I was married and living in a nearby city when Aunt Evelyn called to announce that Dorothy was back.

"Aunt Evelyn, that can't be," I said. "Dorothy is dead, been dead for thirty years."

"Well, the police have picked up a vagrant here who says she's Dorothy," my aunt said. "Just got through talking with her on the phone. You'd better come home."

I took a personal day from my teaching job, arranged for a neighbor to collect our two sons after school, and instructed my husband on how to thaw spaghetti. Aunt Evelyn, at seventy, was in poor health physically, but her mind had always been clear. Until now. I drove the fifty miles between us worrying that she had had a stroke.

When I turned into our block I saw that Radford Stone, our family lawyer, had arrived. His car was in the drive. The two sat in the comfortable old sitting room drinking coffee, and I think I startled even Radford, whom I'd phoned before leaving home, by my anxious appearance.

Aunt Evelyn's hands trembled a little when she greeted me, but otherwise, she seemed her usual self. We were to see Dorothy—or the woman posing as Dorothy—the next morning, she said. It was late and my aunt was tired.

"How do we know it's Dorothy?" I said.

Radford Stone smiled at me as he stood to go. "That's just it. We don't know. That's something you'll have to help us find out."

Could it really be? What would Dorothy look like after thirty

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years? I wondered. And hope began to turn somersaults in my heart.

"What did she say?" I asked Aunt Evelyn after the attorney left. "Did she sound like Dorothy?"

"Which Dorothy? You know your aunt could do any accent she pleased. She never did sound like the rest of us."

I remembered. Some days Dorothy would be upper-crust English, other days a French countess or a Russian spy—never anybody ordinary.

"Do you think it could be Dorothy after all these years? What do you suppose she wants?" I asked.

"She wants her inheritance. She wants this house. Come, I have to show you something," my aunt said, and taking a familiar key from a string around her neck, she led me to the backyard shed.

"I've saved these through the years," she said, dusting spider webs from a square cookie tin that had been shoved to the back of the shelf. "I got the first one the year you were ten."

The box contained letters—desperate notes—from Dorothy, and canceled checks from Aunt Evelyn. To escape her threatening creditors, my Aunt Dorothy had faked her own death, the first letter explained. She had been living under the name Alicia Stewart in another part of the country, and if Aunt Evelyn could just send enough to tide her over, she wouldn't bother her again. Each note said more or less the same thing: Dorothy needed money. She was living hand to mouth, she said. Being incognito as she was, she found it hard to get jobs in her field. And every letter implored Aunt Evelyn not to give her away. Her creditors would kill her if they knew where she was.

"Did you always know?" I said.

"Know what?" my aunt asked as we walked inside together.

"That Dorothy wasn't really dead."

"Good heavens, no! The first time one of those letters came, I thought I was hearing from a ghost."

"But why did you send her the money?"

She gave my hand a rare squeeze. "Because I didn't want her showing up here again. I didn't want her around you."

"Are you sure they were from Dorothy?" If someone had conned my Aunt Evelyn out of her hard-earned money, they'd better watch out for me!

"I'm sure. I could tell by the handwriting, the way she worded her sentences. And there were little things she said. They were

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from Dorothy all right, but they stopped after you started college. I told her I wouldn't be able to send any more money, and it wouldn't do any good to ask. I thought that would be the end of it—until now."

We sat at the kitchen table and looked at the letters again. There were nine of them, and reading them I could almost hear Dorothy speaking. But not one time did she ask about me.

Obviously Aunt Evelyn had been afraid the people who were after Dorothy would find the canceled checks and letters. That's why she kept them locked in the toolshed. "Why on earth did you keep them at all?" I asked.

"For proof, I guess. Proof that she'd deliberately hoodwinked us all along — although legally I don't know what good it will do. I was afraid she might do something like this. Dorothy wants to sell the house. She needs the money, she says. It's all she has left."

It was all Evelyn had left too. "Try not to worry," I told her. "It could be an impostor. Somebody who knew Dorothy, knew the property was supposed to come to her."

Oh Lord, I hoped I was right. But would I know her when I saw her? As often as I had thought of Dorothy, I couldn't remember her face.

The face that waited for us in the small room at the police station the next morning didn't look like Dorothy's face at all. It was an old face, a face worn with life, and the eyes in it were stagnant.

She stepped forward, then hesitated before taking my hand. "Emily? Emily Jane. You remember me, don't you? I'm Dorothy. Your Dorothy. We had fun, didn't we?"

This woman wasn't as tall as I remembered Dorothy, but then I was only seven. Besides, she was much too thin, her voice had a raspy sound, and she wore her yellow-dyed hair in sort of a roll on top of her head. I couldn't see Dorothy there at all. If it weren't for the copper sunflower earrings and that scar on her arm where the footlight had exploded, I wouldn't have known it was her.

I turned away. "I'm sorry," I told Radford. "This is definitely not my aunt." I slipped her a few bills and she left by bus that same day.

Later Aunt Evelyn and I burned Dorothy's letters one by one in the sitting-room grate. I cried all the way home.●

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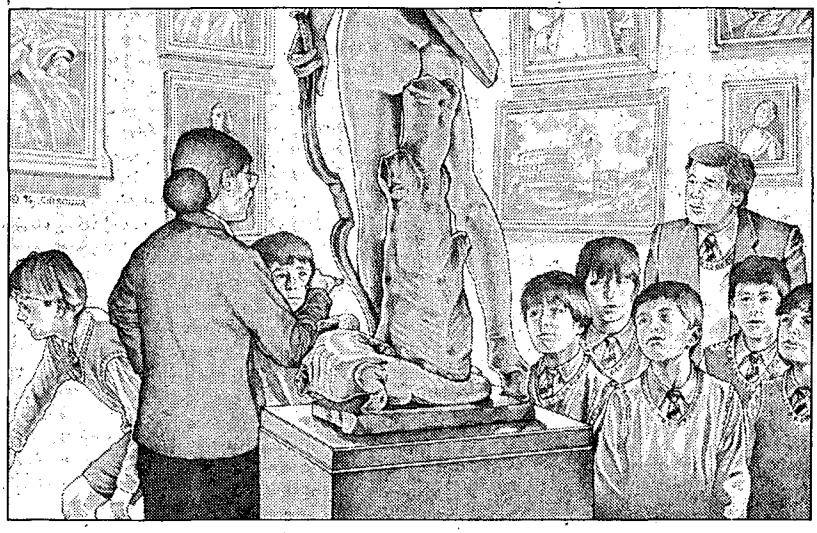

Art by Ron Chironna

A Tour Too Far

by Eileen Dewhurst

Somewhere around her middle forties, Miss Muriel Clitheroe sublimated her unattained desire for the perfect man into a fulfilling passion for the perfect artefact.

This was a change for the better so far as Miss Clitheroe's temperament was concerned, which she herself had come to admit was really more comfortable with things than with people.

Miss Clitheroe, an only child of socially uneasy parents, had in fact, never been very good at personal relationships. It was all right in the municipal library where she spent her working life. There, her contacts with people were defined by her office, and all verbal exchanges could be limited to books. And in her lunch hour she could cross the central square from one imposing classical revival to another and browse the collection bequeathed to her native town at the turn of the century by a local philanthropist. It was still the small Lancashire town's chief glory, and Miss

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Clitheroe had been familiar with it for as long as she could remember. The philanthropist had had a good eye as well as a ready cheque book, and had built up a fine collection of Chinese porcelain, nineteenth-century pictures (stronger on the Pre-Raphaelites than the Impressionists, which was all right by Miss Clitheroe), and important eighteenth-century English commodes — there was even one with written evidence of its provenance in the workshops of Thomas Chippendale.

Miss Clitheroe found her situation increasingly to her taste and dreaded retirement, but during her last working year she became aware that a second career awaited her. When the time came and she had to leave the library, her devoted study of the gallery's treasures and their history had its reward: She was able to take up a position as guide to the Pendlebury Collection.

As with her work in the library, the nature of her new appointment confined her personal contacts within reassuring boundaries: The giver and the receiver simply became the teacher and the taught. Not so frequently, to Miss Clitheroe's one regret; her work in the gallery was by its nature intermittent, dependent on the groups who asked to be shown around. But there were always expeditions with the National Trust, or the Friends of the Museums and Art Galleries, to look forward to, and over the uneventful years she had saved a great deal of her salary. With fewer and fewer regretful moments, life was sweet.

There was no doubt, Miss Clitheroe reflected on a cold bright autumn afternoon as she briskly crossed the square towards her second workplace, that the most manageable audiences for her lecture tours were the elderly. The elderly moved when she moved,

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stood still when she stood still, always in a neat group close around her, politely and silently listening to what she had to tell them about her beloved furniture and porcelain and pictures. The elderly didn't go wandering off on their own being independent and then getting lost and breaking her flow when one of the uniformed attendants shepherded them back to her.

On the other hand, she had to admit that the middle-aged tended to be the most responsive—unless there was a bossy know-all (usually, to Miss Clitheroe's regret, a woman) who argued the toss over everything she said.

Miss Clitheroe paused on the steps leading up to the pillared portico in the centre of the Portland stone facade and looked back at the neatly-laid-out municipal gardens without seeing them, suddenly reluctant to go in. The most difficult groups were the youngsters, and this afternoon she had a party of schoolboys.

Preferable to schoolgirls, surprisingly. Schoolgirls, unless they were very young (Miss Clitheroe shuddered as a certain memory assailed her), were sulky and reluctant. The last time she had had schoolgirls they had peeled off bit by bit in ostentatiously bored subgroups so that by the time she was halfway through, all she had left were the two teachers and one tiresome seeker after knowledge who breathed like a panting puppy and interrupted Miss Clitheroe's every answer with another question.

Boys at least showed some enthusiasm, even though they never seemed able to keep still. Rolling around the rooms in their grey jerseys like blobs of mercury, Miss Clitheroe had once thought, a day or so after she had broken a thermometer . . .

Shaking herself back to duty, she completed her ascent of the steps and entered the building, nodded to the attendant as she bypassed the turnstile, and went as she always did straight into the ladies' cloakroom just inside the marble-floored entrance hall.

As usual there was nothing for her to do with her appearance beyond look at it in the speckled mirror over the old-fashioned washbasins. Her French pleat was immune to all types of weather, and in all temperatures her complexion remained pale and matte. In any case, her bus dropped her at the corner of the square, and it had to be a very wet day for any splashes to sully the backs of her stockings.

Miss Clitheroe made a token gesture of straightening the Victorian bar brooch linking the two points of the collar of her classic blouse, then looked up at her thin, expressionless face and experi-

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enced the brief pang of regret that still sometimes took her unawares when she was reminded that she had been good-looking, and thought of the contrast between the few men who had been available for encouragement in real life and the heroes of the romantic fiction she was ashamed that she continued to enjoy.

As usual, she had arrived early, and when she emerged from the cloakroom the party was only just beginning to straggle out of the coach she could see through the glass in the entrance doors. They were in uniform, more blobs of mercury, but Miss Clitheroe's experience was that uniformed children were more likely to be within the control of their teachers. Apart, of course, from the occasional Terror who appeared to be beyond discipline.

There was one of these today.

Miss Clitheroe spotted him at once, jamming the turnstile with a grubby handkerchief and looking wide-eyed and innocent at Geoff, the attendant on duty, as Geoff struggled to release it. Geoff knew what Miss Clitheroe was in for; their eyes met in a moment of understanding as the group surged between them. The presence of a young and muscular teacher fore and aft of the line didn't ease Miss Clitheroe's wariness, even when they managed to organize the boys into a group around her and impose silence as she began her introductory speech—the short version, suitable for schoolchildren.

"Good afternoon to you all, and welcome to our beautiful gallery!" Miss Clitheroe's voice, its once-Lancashire vowels now honed to a received pronunciation only a Professor Higgins would have rumbled, rose against the echo rebounding from the stone, the tiles, and the stained glass that surrounded them. Later, in the smaller rooms, she could talk more intimately. "Sir James Pendlebury knew exactly what sort of building he wanted for his treasures, and as mayor of the town and a tireless worker on its behalf he had sufficient influence — and sufficient wealth" — as always, Miss Clitheroe offered her first wry smile at this point— "to be able, in eighteen ninety-eight, to purchase the whole of the south side of Pendlebury Square. Yes!" Miss Clitheroe acknowledged a quickening of interest whether or not it was in evidence. "Central Square was renamed in his honour at the ceremony to mark the opening of his gallery." One of the masters murmured approvingly into Miss Clitheroe's pause for effect. "Although he appointed a leading local architect to design the gallery, Sir James personally supervised the building work at every stage . . ."

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It was the Terror, of course, who had frayed the neat edge of the group, scuffing his shoes across the marble to pull a face at a Victorian statue of Apollo. And put out a hand . . .

"Before we start," Miss Clitheroe said quickly, "there is one thing we say to all our visitors: Please don't touch!" She nodded towards the Terror, and one of the teachers, smiling wearily, took him by the shoulders and pushed him back into the group. As he was propelled forward, the boy looked Miss Clitheroe in the eye and grinned.

A challenge. Well, she had met them before.

Nevertheless, she thought it prudent to limit herself to the minimal introduction reserved for when potential troublemakers were present, and soon had the party in the first of the larger rooms—one of her favourites, with its Pre-Raphaelite paintings and the finest of the commodes. The second of her wry smiles came the first time she used the word "commode" and explained what it *originally* meant—an eighteenth-century English cabinet in the French taste for use and decoration in drawing rooms. It was in the centre of this gallery that the Chippendale commode was displayed, on a platform to protect its delicate gilded legs from inadvertent contact with the shoes of visitors.

The Terror's shoes were about to make deliberate contact.

"Oh no!" Miss Clitheroe was rooted to the spot in shocked disbelief, but again one of the masters had him by the shoulders before any damage could be done.

"Sorry," the master murmured, and to Miss Clitheroe's relief retained his grip. This time the Terror winked.

"I wonder, Miss Clitheroe . . ."

Turning round, Miss Clitheroe was forced to accept that it wasn't her day. Behind her, accompanied by his tripod, lighting equipment, and camera, stood the one person on the gallery staff whom she disliked, with his insolent stare and tendency to make facetious and even personal comments. Frank Cunningham, Clerk of Works. It had been recently decided that the gallery's contents should be comprehensively recorded on film, and Frank Cunningham had appointed himself photographer. This wasn't the first time he and Miss Clitheroe had coincided in their official capacities, and Miss Clitheroe had usually managed to claim the field. Mr. Cunningham might be a powerful N.C.O. but in Miss Clitheroe's opinion he would never make an officer—what man

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would, who pronounced his name *Cooningham?* — and she had made her opinion clear.

But today she couldn't risk the delay of a confrontation. "Very well, Mr. Cunningham, if you must. I'll take my party through to the Tudor and Stuart room."

Miss Clitheroe noted with amusement the surprise in Mr. Cunningham's coarse-featured face. "Very good of you, Miss Clitheroe." But the surprise had quickly faded and the eyes were once more bold and disrespectful. As she led her party away, Miss Clitheroe suffered an involuntary shudder.

"The panelling in this room is Elizabethan and comes from a house in Essex . . ."

The Terror was still under physical control, and Miss Clitheroe relaxed into the influence of the room. How she loved it! Her eyes as she talked caressed the proportions of the court cupboard, the caning on the Charles II daybed, the early trompe l'oeil marquetry of the cabinet that could be either Dutch or French . . .

The Terror had wriggled free and was bouncing on the red velvet Queen Anne sofa in the room ahead, smiling through the narrow doorway at Miss Clitheroe as he kicked his heels against the carved stretcher for the interminable seconds it took one of the masters to run through and repossess him.

Miss Clitheroe decided against including the smallest and most vulnerable rooms in her tour.

As she led the party through the others, she was made steadily and more miserably aware she had been wise. The Terror wrenched up the lid of a delicate straw marquetry box made by Napoleonic prisoners of war, tried to unscrew the finial of a George II carriage clock, and just failed to open a glass cabinet containing a wax model of the first Queen Elizabeth dressed in delicate paper quilting.

Admiring her own restraint, Miss Clitheroe merely remarked that it was a pity when visitors abused the gallery's generous policy of making its treasures accessible. The Terror gave her another dazzling smile.

The relief of shepherding the flock down to the basement tearoom was enormous.

Until she noticed that the Terror was missing.

"Excuse me," she murmured, and fled back up the stairs.

She found him in a side corridor, trying with a penknife to detach a high-relief lion from the front of a commode. Miss

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Clitheroe had never in her life been so appalled. She saw red. Quite literally.

"You little devil!"

She had the thin shoulders between her hands and was shaking them.

Backwards and forwards.

"Geroff of me, tha' old cow . . . Ow!"

Miss Clitheroe was vaguely aware of a regular dull thudding sound accompanying the shaking, but not of the shouting and struggling growing feebler and feebler.

Backwards and forwards. Backwards and forwards . . .

It wasn't until the red mist cleared that Miss Clitheroe realized the thudding sound was the Terror's head striking the sharp edge of tile which formed the central dado along the wall.

And that she was shaking a corpse.

She tried to tell herself it was a boy temporarily stunned but she knew that it wasn't.

The dead weight, and the eyes so fixed and wide.

Miss Clitheroe dropped the corpse to the floor and stood with clasped hands, trembling and moaning.

"Jesus Christ, Miss Clitheroe!"

"O-o-oh! Mr. Cooningham!"

She was actually glad to see the Clerk of Works, to have something from the everyday break into her nightmare.

Mr. Cunningham was bending down, examining the small, still mound on the ground between them. Straightening up, shaking his head and again blaspheming, pointing to an enormous oak cupboard against the wall behind her. Miss Clitheroe noticed it for the first time. The very first time; she had never seen it before.

"In there!" Mr. Cunningham said.

There was a large key in the cupboard lock. Mr. Cunningham had to struggle with it for a few terrible seconds, then the cupboard was open, the mound scooped up like a piece of dog-dirt—Miss Clitheroe was shocked even in her horror that such an image should occur to her—and deposited inside. Mr. Cunningham relocked the door and pocketed the key.

"Have you seen anyone since you left your party, Miss Clitheroe?"

"Only . . ." Miss Clitheroe retched. "No!"

"Good. You came up to go to the ladies', didn't you?" At the head of the basement stairs. "Better get back now to the tearoom."

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Mr. Cunningham was examining the tiles with which the Terror's head had come in contact (Miss Clitheroe could not accept as yet that she had been responsible), and the floor below them.

"No visible blood, but I'll wash it over. Go back to your party, Miss Clitheroe. And pull yourself together or I shan't be able to help you."

"Yes. Of course." He was right, she had to pull herself together. Get back to the basement stairs without being seen and be as surprised and upset as everyone else when it was discovered the Terror was missing. She wasn't a fool, she could do it. "Thank you, Mr. Cunningham. You're—very kind."

Under Mr. Cunningham's still-disconcerting gaze Miss Clitheroe took to her heels, forcing herself to slow down as she reached the door of the ladies' room undetected and descend the stairs in her customary sedate manner. Normally she would have been hurt by evidence that she had not been missed. But today the animated chat of the boys, the relaxed faces of the masters lolling at each end of the long table, was a relief so great that for a moment she was giddy.

"Enjoying your teas? That's right!"

The masters had turned to her in surprise, a warning that she mustn't overdo it, make herself sound too affable, that she must just be her normal self.

But she was, in fact, being superhuman. She was managing to sit down for a full fifteen minutes by her watch before asking where the Terror was. "I hope he isn't swinging on a chandelier!" she continued, and felt herself smile.

The masters' relaxation was over. They rose from the table, and after consultation at the foot of the stairs, one of them went racing up.

The other came back to the table, where the giddiness had forced Miss Clitheroe to sit down again. A general restlessness was now apparent, and she and the master had difficulty restraining the boys from leaving the tearoom. When the other master reappeared, Miss Clitheroe also had difficulty getting up and walking across to him.

"So you haven't found him," she said, aware of the boys crowding behind her.

"Not a sign." The masters exchanged looks. "But the chap on the door's admitted leaving it just now for a few moments, so the little tyke could have got out. Look . . ." His eyes pleaded with Miss

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Clitheroe. "How about if our guide comes round with one of us and points out the nooks and crannies Tony could have got into? If we don't find him then we'll have to assume he's off out somewhere."

"Okay," the other master said. "And I'll get the rest of them onto the coach and we'll drive around." His gaze swept the surging group. "Priority number two's getting them settled."

"You're too right. Miss, er . . . ?"

"Clitheroe. Yes, of course. I'll lead the way."

Miss Clitheroe's legs were only just strong enough to take her up the stairs. She decided to get the worst over first, and led the way to the fatal corridor. Not too fast or direct, pausing en route to peer as convincingly as she could manage into the alcoves and recesses along the way.

"There's this corridor . . . ." Miss Clitheroe peered fearfully into it, then bobbed back, involuntarily smiling. "But you can see at a glance . . ."

The master came to stand beside her, and they both gazed down the uncluttered expanse of corridor, broken only by the abused commode. The cupboard had disappeared.

"Perhaps you'd better take a look in there." With renewed energy, but remembering now that she shouldn't be smiling, Miss Clitheroe indicated the only door in the corridor wall, that of a gentlemen's cloakroom. "Do please go and see." She felt like the smug-looking criminals in TV crime series who open their front doors to the police and say, "Be my guest," and leave them to look round on their own because they've got rid of the evidence. . . .

Criminals? Evidence of *what?*

Miss Clitheroe had to lean against the wall rather than faint, and told herself sternly that it still wasn't safe to start thinking.

The master came out of the cloakroom shaking his head, and shook it all round the gallery, downstairs in the shop, and through the storage vaults, where they were joined by Mr. Cunningham and the assistant curator. Miss Clitheroe had been afraid that they would come upon the cupboard somewhere else, but it was nowhere to be seen. When they eventually reached the doors, the assistant curator questioned Geoff, who admitted, crushed, that he had answered a quick call of nature. Miss Clitheroe could have fallen on his neck.

She and the master and the assistant curator went outside, where the coach was just drawing up. The other master got out

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and told them they'd drawn a blank, but would now search more widely.

"And go to the police, I suppose," Miss Clitheroe said.

"Yes, of course," one of the masters responded quickly, as they looked at each other in alarm.

"We're sorry about this," the other told the assistant curator, after a pause. "But with all those dark corners down under . . . If we don't find him in town, the police'll be bound to want another look."

"Of course, we have to expect it," the assistant curator reassured him.

"Let us hope," Miss Clitheroe observed, "that you find the boy round the shops or in the market."

"That'll be it," one of the masters said heartily, and they shook hands and thanked her for the tour before getting into the coach.

Miss Clitheroe and the assistant curator watched it drive off and went back into the gallery, Miss Clitheroe having to keep a very tight rein on her thoughts. She told the assistant curator she had gone upstairs again after settling the party in the tearoom. "To the ladies' cloakroom," she explained, dropping her eyes.

"And you saw no sign of the boy then? You'd have remembered what he looked like?"

Miss Clitheroe struggled with the hysterical laughter rising inside her. "I'd have known a boy in school uniform on his own was in the wrong place, Mr. Armitage. But I didn't see one, I'm afraid."

"Try not to worry, Miss Clitheroe, it wasn't your fault." The assistant curator wandered off, leaving Miss Clitheroe freshly shocked by how easy it was.

"Eeh, lass!" The man at the turnstile raised his red, unhappy face from his hands.

"Don't you worry, either, Geoff," Miss Clitheroe advised. "He was a little devil, a born wrecker. . . ."

She forced herself to stop. And Mr. Cunningham was there, smiling at her.

"A word, Miss Clitheroe?" he suggested. "In my office?"

Mr. Cunningham's office was off the main hall. He motioned Miss Clitheroe to the chair in front of his desk and sat down behind it.

"You're a miracle worker, Mr. Cunningham!"

"No, Miss Clitheroe, just quick to take advantage. That wood-

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worm check we ran yesterday through the vaults—the cupboard was riddled. It had to be got out as quickly as possible, so it was arranged to bring it up and get it taken away the same day. It went while you were having tea. For burning."

"Oh . . ." Miss Clitheroe leaned back and closed her eyes. "But won't they open . . . make sure . . . ?"

"I told 'em we'd already looked when we got it up, which we had. If they'd insisted on looking again we'd have discovered we'd mislaid the key." Miss Clitheroe opened her eyes, and Mr. Cunningham stared into them. "But they were satisfied. Straight into the flames, they told me."

"Mr. Cunningham . . . Thank you." He deserved something for his unselfish gesture. For not asking questions. "If I could just try to explain . . ."

"I don't think you could, Miss Clitheroe," Mr. Cunningham said softly. "But I saw the brat. I understand."

"Mr. Cunningham . . . I really can't thank you enough."

"I think you can, Miss Clitheroe."

"Anything," she said, leaning towards him but aware as she spoke that she must not be too liberal.

"You see . . ." Mr. Cunningham's voice was almost dreamy, his gaze now fixed on the ceiling. "The reason I entered that corridor was to photograph the Mortlake tapestry across the end. Just a beautiful woven landscape. But there were two figures in it. . . ."

Mr. Cunningham brought his gaze down and fixed it on Miss Clitheroe, smiling.

Miss Clitheroe had thought the worst was over but it was only beginning. She could feel it running like a poison through her body, all the way down to her fingers and toes.

She couldn't speak, but Mr. Cunningham wasn't expecting her to.

"No one will ever know about it, of course. It'll be our secret, one of the many things we shall have in common. But I shan't mention it again, because I'm going to be very kind to you. As you're going to be very kind to me. In all sorts of ways, it could be." Mr. Cunningham looked her up and down. It occurred to Miss Clitheroe that he was probably only four or five years her junior. She tried to repress another shudder. "You mustn't say the sort of thing you said just now to Geoff, by the way. You need looking after."

Yes, of course she did. Mr. Cunningham had to protect his investment. His investment in the private person of Muriel Maud

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Clitheroe. The situation was so hideously unbelievable, Miss Clitheroe pinched her thigh in the sudden hope that she was dreaming and could make herself wake up. But she remained seated in front of Mr. Cunningham's desk, bathed in his terrible geniality.

"I should go home now, Muriel, lass," he was saying gently. "You must be worn out. Don't fret, I'll be in touch before you know."

He led the way to the door, gripped her arm for an instant as she went out. She crossed the hall, murmured goodbye to Geoff, and went down the steps as if she were floating.

The rest of her life at the beck and call of Mr. Cunningham, or the rest of her life in prison. Miss Clitheroe wondered if it would be preferable to go to the police.

Or . . .

The third possibility appalled her, but by the time she reached her bus stop it had grown as warm and cosy as a blanket around her trembling shoulders.

What had happened by accident could also happen by design. ●

"Did you hear me, Geoffrey? You asked if there was a blunt instrument about and I said, 'Your wit, dear boy, your wit!' Haw, haw, haw."

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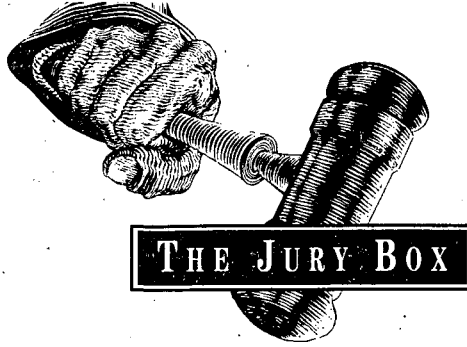

by Jon L. Breen

If you read *EQMM* and its stablemate, *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine,* you must enjoy mystery short stories. So here are some more sources of supply in book form.

Among the new anthologies, Robert J. Randisi has edited *First Cases: The Private Eyes* (Dutton, $22.95), gathering the first short story cases of 15 characters, including Michael Collins's Dan Fortune, Bill Pronzini's Nameless, Lawrence Block's Matt Scudder, Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone, and Linda Barnes's Carlotta Carlyle. In the latest *EQMM* anthology, *Murder Most British* (St. Martin's, $21.95), editor Janet Hutchings traces the development of British mystery fiction from pioneers like Doyle, Orczy, and Freeman to contemporaries like Rendell, Keating, and Lovesey. *The Oxford Book of American Detective Short Stories* (Oxford University Press, $25), edited by Tony Hillerman and Rosemary Herbert, is a landmark retrospective anthology from Poe to Muller.

In *Robert Bloch: Appreciations of the Master* (TOR, $24.95), edited by Richard Matheson and Ricia Mainhardt, eloquent and loving tributes to the late author from writers as famous and varied as Peter Straub, Stephen King, Harlan Ellison, Ray Bradbury, and William Peter Blatty take up about one fourth of the 382 pages, the balance devoted to 19 of Bloch's wonderful stories, most or all previously collected, including such classics as "That Hell-Bound Train" and "Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper."

Here are half a dozen new single-author collections, followed by a couple of token novels.

**** Edward D. Hoch: *Diagnosis: Impossible: The Problems of Dr. Sam Hawthorne,* Crippen &

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Landru, P. O. Box 9315, Norfolk, VA 23505-9315; $15 trade paperback, $38 (tentative) limited-edition hardcover. If there was ever a short-story detective who deserved the permanence of book form, it's the New England doctor who has been delivering his locked-room, impossible-crime memoirs in these pages for over twenty years. The volume gathers the first dozen in the series, originally published between 1974 and 1978, leaving room for at least another three comparable volumes. Marvin Lachman's chronology of the series lists the tales in order of publication and identifies the period for each.

**** Ed Gorman: *Moonchasers and Other Stories,* Forge, $24.95. Most of these stories, including the extraordinary title novella, have been published in previous collections by the author, *Prisoners* (1992) and *Cages* (1995), both issued in limited editions by small publishers. Even fans who have the earlier books will want this one for 80+ pages of previously uncollected material, notably the haunting and unforgettable (a term I don't use lightly) *EQMM* story "En Famille." Also new to Gorman collections are the carnival-based Ray Bradbury homage "The Wind from Midnight," the suspenseful final story "Out There in the Darkness," which like the title story is scheduled for big-screen filming in 1996, and an afterword by Dean Koontz.

*** Colin Dexter: *Morse's Greatest Mystery and Other Stories,* Crown, $23. Of the eleven tales gathered here, six involve Chief Inspector Morse, usually accompanied by Sgt. Lewis, and all feature the kind of complexity and unpredictability that mark the author's novels. Of the Morses, "The Inside Story" may be longest and best; of the non-Morses, "At the Lulu-Bar Motel" is notable for its faux-American (almost Jim Thompson-ish) style, while "A Case of Mis-Identity" gives a new ending to one of the most famous Sherlock Holmes stories. (The ethics of lifting a whole plot for pastiche-writing purposes could make somebody an interesting scholarly article.)

*** Joyce Porter: *Dover: The Collected Stories,* Foul Play/Countryman, $19. That the disgusting Chief Inspector Dover and his Sgt. MacGregor (first name Longsuffering) were another British cop team nearly as good in short form as long is demonstrated by these eleven stories, most or all published in *EQMM* from the 60s to the 80s. Not seen by me were the introduction by Robert Barnard and afterword by Canon J. R. Porter.

*** Walter Satterthwait: *The*

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Gold of Mayani, Buffalo Medicine Press, Box 1762, Gallup, NM 87305; $25 trade, $50 limited. This beautifully produced volume gathers the six stories about Sergeant Andrew M'butu from 1980s issues of *AHMM.* The African background is nicely handled, especially the interaction of African and European characters, and the plots are often complex enough to support novel length. Sarah Caudwell provides a brief foreword, Ernest Franklin some fine illustrations, and the author an autobiographical afterword.

*** Margery Allingham: *The Darings of the Red Rose,* Crippen & Landru, $15. A couple of these eight linked stories, about a London society beauty who takes on a secret criminal identity to take revenge on an octet of unscrupulous financiers while becoming romantically involved with the upper-crust sleuth working on the case, have appeared in *EQMM* in recent months, but otherwise they are unseen since their anonymous British magazine publication in 1930. As B. A. Pike notes in his typically acute introduction, the stories do Allingham "no disservice and should even add to her reputation: not because they are undiscovered masterpieces but because they demonstrate so forcibly that she was a truly professional writer who could turn her hand to anything."

**** Barbara D'Amato: *Hard Christmas,* Scribners, $20. The series about Chicago journalist Cat Marsala is one of the best going in at least two areas: pure fair-play puzzle-spinning and a fresh and well-realized specialized background in each book—in this case, it's Christmas tree farming. Longtime fans of D'Amato will note the significance of the Michigan tree-farming family's surname, DeGraaf, and especially one ancestor named Gerritt DeGraaf, the name of the Golden Age-style detective D'Amato featured in two pre-Marsala paperback originals. One question, though: Do chickadees in Michigan really sing at night?

*** Jan Burke: *Remember Me Irene,* Simon and Schuster, $21. Irene Kelly of the Las Piernas (alias Long Beach) *Express* is another series reporter with a deservedly devoted following. Her fourth case, charmingly told and nicely complicated if somewhat overlong, involves civic corruption, a graduate teaching assistant turned homeless alcoholic, and a club made up of a lecherous professor's former (now wiser) romantic conquests.

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

A FRIENDLY GESTURE

by Iris Mason

It wasn't that Bertha had a lot of friends and could spare one. In fact, Monique was her only friend. However, there comes a time when you have to stand up for yourself and no one, friend or no friend, should be allowed to monopolize your one and only prized possession! Or so Bertha had decided after much thought on the subject. She had fruitlessly complained to Monique, and when nothing else seemed to work, she took drastic measures. Today the matter had been resolved.

Bertha and Monique had gone for an afternoon walk on the railroad tracks near home. Reaching the midpoint of the tracks suspended precariously above the rushing river far below, Bertha brushed up against Monique—just hard enough to push her off balance and down into the turbulent waters. Monique was usually pretty quick on her feet—and lucky, so lucky! She had survived the previous push into oncoming traffic at the curb downtown, the fall from the barn loft, even the fall

Canadian Iris Mason hails from Edmonton, Alberta. She is a mother of three and until recently confined her writing to stories and plays for use in her children's schools and for special local events. In the small Manitoba town where she grew up, Ms. Mason was known to the local librarian as a voracious reader—especially of mysteries. A hearty welcome to a long-time fan turned writer.

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down the stairs. But today, her luck had run out—Monique couldn't swim!

Monique deserved it, Bertha thought to herself defensively. Look at all the things she'd put up with and never said a word. She thought back to all the old offenses. She hadn't said anything when Tommy and Sally always played more with Monique than with her. She hadn't even said anything when the kids had given them nicknames. Monique was called Muffy—sounded like a soft, feminine, fluffy little thing. And what did they call her? Tubby—Tubby! Then there was that Christmas Tommy gave Monique a soft cashmere sweater. And what did she get? A nail file—one lousy nail file!

Everyone fussed over Monique—even strangers. One time, while they were out for a walk, she heard some strangers say as they passed, "Wow, isn't she gorgeous? I wish I had one like her at home!" From years of experience Bertha knew they weren't talking about her; people only talked that way about Monique.

No one seemed to understand (or care!) how hard it was for Bertha always being second best—always being "old faithful." Everyone expected her always to be there and listen to their problems, to make them feel better. Monique could act as fickle as she wanted—snubbing people, walking by them without an acknowledgement—but everyone still loved her and still fawned all over her. Would they do that if Bertha treated them that way? Not likely! They'd say, "Hey, what's the matter with you?"

No one cared about her feelings! When her nail broke off, did anyone fuss over her? No! When her hair started to fall out that time the shampoo was too strong, did anyone say, "Oh, poor Bertha, what can we do for you?" No! But if Monique got one sliver under her nail, everyone was falling all over themselves to help her.

Bertha had endured all these things like a true friend—never once complaining, never blaming Monique. When they were younger, it hadn't mattered that Bertha was fat and plain. They had played together and strayed together. You never saw one without the other.

They were the best of friends—until last week. Last week Monique had gone too far! She had started monopolizing Bertha's one and only prized possession. That was too much to bear! Surely she didn't expect to get away with that? Even compliant Bertha had her pride.

Well, she had shown her—she'd show all of them! No one pushed Bertha around and got away with it.

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Now she just needed to go home and wait for the discovery of Monique's disappearance. Everyone would come to her for a listening and sympathetic ear and she'd give it. Not for a moment would they suspect that she had had anything to do with the disappearance of her best friend. In fact, everyone would probably fawn all over her—*Poor Bertha, what will she do without Monique?* And she would just give that sad little smile and say nothing.

Going in the back door, Bertha quietly sauntered into the living room. She gazed at her prized possession. Streaming in through the living room window, it caressed the carpet below, creating the warmest, cosiest spot in the house. Bertha stretched luxuriously and then padded over into the midst of it. Curling up in its warmth, she purred herself to sleep. ●

DETECTIVERSE

A SHOT RANG OUT

by Lenore T. Nightshade

A shot rang out
I heard a scream
I knew that it was not a dream
A shot rang out
The air was still
I felt a quite unearthly chill
A shot rang out
I gazed ahead
The sky was dark; the blood was red
A shot rang out
Am I insane?
Could it have been the driving rain?
A shot rang out
And here I stand
A smoking gun falls from MY hand
A SHOT RANG OUT

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DANEGELD

by Peter Turnbull

Tuesday—06:10

The man was dead. Jimmy Bird saw that the man was dead. Jimmy Bird stood and stared at the dead man, the head back and on one side, a bluish tinge about a well-set, middle-aged face. There was, he noted, a stillness about the location, at the very edge of the city, and the only sounds were those of the birds in the hedgerows and the high-speed tick-over of the engine of his bus.

That day had started like any other for Jimmy Bird. An early rise, not so bad now in August, but an ordeal in winter. Yet even in winter he was pleased to leave his house. Only three years into his marriage, two weans, and him already glad to hear the alarm clock because it meant freedom for a few hours, and he already dreaded the end of a shift because it meant that soon he would be returning homeward. As one of his mates had once said, "It's all right till the weans comes along." Jimmy Bird had found out that it was all right for six weeks, until the mother-in-law had come along and then did everything but wriggle into the bed with them. She and his wife, mother and daughter, he had observed, had that strange ability, not uncommon among women in the west of Scotland, to speak at the same time, yet be able to listen to each other

"Turnbull writes realistically and without sentiment about his cops, interesting the reader in their lives without glamorizing them," *Publishers Weekly* wrote in reviewing one of Mr. Turnbull's novels. Set mostly in the grittier parts of Glasgow, the series of police procedurals the author launched in the 1980s has so far seen print in eight novels and a score of short stories. If the following case for Glasgow's P Division hooks you on further adventures, look for *The Killing Floor* (St. Martin's 2/95). †

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and somehow carry on a conversation—though one, usually, of a highly collusive nature. Not at all like him and his father. When they talked it was in short, snappy sentences, but at least they took turns to speak, one then the other. But his wife and mother-in-law, if they'd been in the room talking, Jimmy Bird would enter and silence would descend suddenly, as if somebody had thrown a switch and the "dragon"—he couldn't think of a better name—the dragon would slink into a corner and glare at him. Just stare, sometimes drawing looks, but usually just a stare, as if some homing mechanism behind her eyes had locked onto him. It succeeded in driving him out of the house and so where could he go but a Delanay's, and there was a Delanay's at the bottom of the street. So he went to Delanay's and stayed there and came home pure reeking of cheap wine and was normally still sober enough, just, to see the dragon give an I-told-you-so nod towards her daughter. Jimmy Bird was twenty-four years old and he found it difficult to see why people got married, so he did.

That morning he had descended the red and cream common stair and stepped into Irongray Street. He didn't like Haghill. He came from Castlemilk. He wanted to live in "the milk," but his wife had come from Haghill and wouldn't leave her mother. He looked at the low-rise tenement scheme of grey brick, black railings round overgrown gardens, and the burned-out cars, two of them. He walked up the street towards the Edinburgh Road. He enjoyed the mornings, especially the early turn in the summer, when there's no "r" in the month. He walked to work when he could, having found that it was only the walk from home to work that allowed a sense of self, the walk home less so. He wasn't himself in his home, with Sadie and the dragon nipping his head about something, or the weans screaming for their milk, and he wasn't himself at the wheel or taking fares through a gap in a Perspex screen. He reached Edinburgh Road and looked across at the green expanse of Alexandra Park, lush in the rising sun. He turned to his right and walked towards Queenslie bus depot. For the next eight hours, or more if overtime was available, he'd be driving the 41 bus from the stop in the City Centre, in the grid system off Hope Street, to the terminus at Easterhouse and back again, this way and that. But it was a job and it paid a living wage. He clocked on, bantered with the other drivers, had a mug of steaming tea in the canteen, and then climbed into his cab. He took the vehicle out of the garage and turned right into Edinburgh Road and some two miles later turned left at Wellhouse Road and

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into the scheme. Easterhouse was similar to Haghill but larger, low rise, brick built, and newer than Haghill by about thirty years. A single scheme housing more people than the city of Perth, a murder each week or two. He followed the route he could follow in his sleep: right into Westerhouse Road by the angular Baptist church and the fire station, left into Lochend Road opposite the swimming baths. He drove the orange double-decker down the thin ribbon of roads and reached the junction of Lochend Road and Lochdochart Road and the flat, dark grey tarmac of the bus terminus. A ten-minute stop, a smoke, a stretch of legs, almost into the country, because this is where Glasgow meets rural Scotland, and there is no gentleness of giving of one to the other. It is a distinct border, sudden, sharp. Here a man could stand with one foot in the beginning of endless fields, and with the other foot in a major European city. But that, he had noticed, was the nature of his native city, no melting and merging of areas as with English towns and cities. Here in Glasgow areas abutted each other with sharp and distinct borders, as in the north of Glasgow where he had noticed that genteel Bearsden was separated from harsh "needle city" Drumchapel by a wooden fence a few feet high. Jimmy Bird saw the car as he approached the terminus, light blue, blending well with the sky, low slung, Japanese, top-of-the-range. He didn't personally care for Japanese cars, but he had to concede that this particular vehicle represented the sort of wealth that he could only dream about. And that meant that the vehicle hadn't been there long. This was Easterhouse, another needle city, also "giro city," "glue city," "crack town." A car like this one would, Jimmy Bird knew, get attacked at any time between about midday and three A.M. With an occupant it would get stoned. Without an occupant it would get stripped to its body shell and then that would be torched. He eyed the vehicle, sitting there, glinting in the morning sun. He looked at the driver, a male, sitting still, head back.

Sitting still. Unusually still.

Jimmy Bird felt a strange sense of unease creep menacingly over him. He felt a deep certainty that all was not well. He left his bus, stepping out of the passenger entrance, and walked slowly but purposefully towards the car. He knew, as he walked, that he was going to view his first deceased of the human kind.

He stood by the driver's door and peered at the occupant. The driver, or the man who occupied the driver's seat, was a middle-aged man, he saw, and was casually dressed, clean shaven,

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though an overnight stubble rimmed his chin. He sat with his head back, slightly to one side, eyes closed, a bluish tinge around his mouth. His right hand rested in his lap, his left rested on the passenger seat and held a newspaper, rolled up and in what Jimmy Bird saw was a vicelike grip. Jimmy Bird tapped the window. He didn't expect a response and he didn't get one. He stood and glanced about him. All was still save one curtain three flights up in a nearby tenement which fell shut as he looked in its direction, but for the most part Easterhouse was still slumbering. Jimmy Bird knew that people who live in the scheme are reluctant to leave their beds, reluctant to start another empty day, and often retire in the afternoons for something to do, often to induce a dream while half asleep and so be able to control the dream to a small extent. He had engaged in the practice when he had been unemployed for a period. It was at least safer than drugs, cheaper than alcohol. Jimmy Bird knew that there was some time before enough folk were conscious to form a crowd that would mill about the car with morbid curiosity. But the curtain falling shut was sufficient. If one person had noticed the unfolding drama, then others would have done. He thought better of triggering alarm by running back to his bus, and so walked, casually so. He sat in the driver's seat and reached for the microphone and pressed the Send button. When a crackly voice from the control at Queenslie depot answered his call driver, Bird asked them to ask the police to attend at Easterhouse terminus. He asked they be requested to attend speedily.

Malcolm Montgomerie entered P Division police station by the rear Staff Only entrance. He signed in, growling a good morning to PC Hamilton who stood at the uniform bar, checked his pigeonhole, and walked up the stairs to the CID corridor, taking the steps singly, one at a time, with a leaden footfall. Montgomerie knew he was moving on automatic pilot. He'd been this way before, his head splitting open lengthways and his throat feeling like the bottom of a budgerigar's cage. He had woken that morning in a strange bed, which was no new experience, and with a strange girl beside him. Again, no new experience. He had woken, it seemed, by some built-in alarm clock which had exploded in his brain at about five A.M., as if some force in him which refused to lay down and die reminded him that he was to be on duty, fit and refreshed, at six A.M. He had glanced up at the ceiling: pale green, an unusual colour for a bedroom and certainly not the colour to

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awaken to in his self-inflicted yet delicate condition. He was able to recall little of the previous evening. A pub, the Rock. God, it just had to be the Rock, or the Rock Island as it was now calling itself. But to dyed-in-the-wool west enders like Montgomerie, the grey blockhouse-like structure which stood surrounded by shrubs with a car park above and behind it, set back from the pavement where Hyndland Road became Highburgh Road, could only be the Rock. It was his local. He gave more money to the staff in the Rock than he gave to the building society to pay off his mortgage. A girl had approached him—yet again, no new experience. His chiselled features and down-turned moustache proved devastatingly attractive to many, many women. He had been on his second pint of 80/- when the girl came to stand beside him: 5' 6", slim, 36C, he guessed. She didn't stand beside him so much as sidle up to him, brushing her arm against his, using long and slender fingers to push her glass across the gantry so that it touched his, gently. Two or three drinks later and having abandoned her friends, she had revealed herself to be Tracy, twenty-three years, already divorced. . . . Later, when the lights had flashed last orders, she had said she had a flat close-by, "wee and rented, but cosy," and she had a bottle of Baileys or wine, "or maybe both."

They had had both. He recalled with a groan of self-reproach while gazing up at the green ceiling that they had had both bottles, and that he had had the larger share.

He had pulled on last night's clothing, staggered out of Tracy's flat, and staggered home. In his flat he had washed, shaved, eaten, swallowed toothpaste in an attempt to smother stale breath, and somehow had made it to P Division by six A.M. He slumped into his chair, and rested his head and arms on his desk.

"Oh, we have a dead one." Abernethy stood and walked to the table which stood in the corner of the DCs' room between grey, steel, Scottish Office filing cabinets and poured Montgomerie a coffee, strong and sweet. He walked over to Montgomerie's desk, planted the mug of steaming liquid in front of him, and said, "Drink it and smile."

Montgomerie obediently curled his hand round the mug and savoured the aroma. It was at least a morning smell, a smell associated with morning. It may, he thought, *may* help to induce the correct frame of mind for the beginning of a working day.

"Hard night?" Abernethy rested his jaw in his left palm.

"Could say that." Montgomerie sipped the coffee. "I need this."

"You need these as well." Abernethy opened a drawer in his

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desk and tossed a packet of extra-strong mints across the room towards Montgomerie. "I can smell your breath from here."

"Oh, and I thought I did something about that." Montgomerie groped on the floor, having missed the catch.

"You ought to get a grip of it, Malcolm."

"I don't need to be told." Montgomerie resented the sting of truth, especially coming as it did from a younger man, new to the police, newer still to the CID.

Abernethy shrugged. "It's your compulsory medical, not mine."

Montgomerie stared at him and then beyond him, out of the window at the graceful curve of red-brick Charing Cross Mansions, which at that moment were glowing becomingly.

"Do you have some work to be getting on with?" Abernethy persisted.

Montgomerie grunted, "Couple of things. Witnesses to interview."

"Well, it's up to you, but if you take my advice you'll get your head down. Fabion will be in at eight-thirty, if not eight twenty-nine. It's now six-twenty. Gives you two hours."

"I look that bad?"

Abernethy nodded. "If you can't sleep pour hot, sweetened black stuff down your neck. Believe me, you look like a dog. Then at about eight-fifteen sign out and go and interview your witness. Come back about midday."

"You mean go home and sleep it off?"

"If you think you could get away with it. It's a chance I'd take. They can call you on the vodaphone if they need you. . . . You just have to sound alert and say you're somewhere else." Abernethy slid into a light summer raincoat. "You've dug a hole for yourself, it's really up to you as to how you climb out of it."

Montgomerie nodded. "That's worth a shot. I think you're right."

"It's quiet. Nothing happened in the night. Nothing to hand over. All you can do is learn from this."

"Yeah." Montgomerie cradled his head. "Yeah." Then the phone on Montgomerie's desk rang. The two cops looked at each other.

"Pray," said Abernethy. "Pray, then answer it." Montgomerie paused then snatched up the phone. "CID, DC Montgomerie. . . . Yes . . ." He groped for a pen and scribbled on his pad. "Yes, I'll be there. . . ." He replaced the handset and shrugged. "Papa Foxtrot India have attended a suspicious death in Easterhouse. CID required."

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"Work it off then." Abernethy turned to go. "You can keep the mints."

"We had to smash the window," Piper explained; a little unnecessarily, thought Montgomerie as he stared into the car at the deceased. "The door was locked, the guy was clearly in distress, if not deceased. The glass had to go. No pulse, flesh was chilly, death about two or three hours ago, I'd say."

"Uh-huh, looks like it." Montgomerie nodded towards the uniformed sergeant, driver of Papa Foxtrot India, first car to attend.

"We've sent for the police surgeon, as per procedure, but it'll be a formality, as you see."

"Aye, but it's best if it was quickly done. I'd like to clear the pitch before the populace stirs." Montgomerie glanced about him. He saw some dozen or so windows with people standing at them peering down onto the bus terminus. Pretty soon, he thought, pretty soon there'll be a crowd. This is Easterhouse, people here gather at spectacles in much the same way that people once gathered at public executions, just to stare. "Who reported him?"

"Bus driver." Piper nodded to the orange double-decker, its engine running, which stood further down the terminus tarmac than hitherto, having been moved at the request of Papa Foxtrot India. "We asked him to stay around, reckon it suited him. He's inside the bus having a fag underneath the No Smoking sign. He'd rather be sitting smoking than working his route. Forty-one route, not the prettiest in Glasgow. Easterhouse to City Centre via Parkhead and back, eight hours a day. Rather him than me."

"Did you get an ID on the registration?"

"Aye, came back just before you came." Piper consulted his notebook. "The vehicle, blue Nissan, as it is, is registered to one Sean Weedbinder, address in Busby."

"Busby. Flash motor owned by a man with a smart address. And it's a few months old at most. This bit of tin cost an arm and a leg, so what is it doing here?"

"Well that, my friend," said Piper, smiling, "is why you are not in uniform, and I am."

"So, an apparently wealthy man drives from his prestigious suburb on the south side of the premier city two or three hours ago to the edge of grim Easterhouse, where he dies. Why?"

"Blue."

"The car . . . ?"

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"No, no," Piper insisted, "about his mouth, a bluish tinge to the flesh."

"Yes," Montgomerie agreed. "Yes there is. He's overdosed on pills."

"And alcohol. You'll see he has a flask."

"I noticed that. I've seen this before, always with women for some reason, but yes, it looks like a suicide. Anyway, I'll go and have a wee chat with the bus driver."

Montgomerie found Jimmy Bird sitting, as Sergeant Piper said he'd be sitting, in one of the passenger seats, smoking a cigarette in open defiance of the council's blanket ban of smoking on buses. He sat in shirt and tie; sun streamed through the windows.

"Mr. Bird?" Montgomerie stepped into the vehicle.

"Just don't call me 'dicky.' " Bird smiled.

"Police."

"So I gathered. Take a seat, there's seventy-six to choose from, or one of eight standing places if you fancy."

Montgomerie sat opposite Bird. He felt himself warming to the young man despite his arrogant disregard for the smoking ban.

"I gather you reported the incident."

"Aye." Bird drew on the nail. . . . "Aye, see you don't park a motor like that just anywhere in this town, and you don't park it in Easterhouse. And it's not too clever to park it on a bus terminus; some drivers use their buses like ramming machines. You know, if you wander into a bus lane or onto a bus terminus, they catch your motor a wee glancing blow, just enough to cost you a wee thousand or two, especially if it's a flash motor. . . . Give the council legal department something to ponder over, you know. Okay, the bus hit the vehicle, but the vehicle was in a Bus Only area. . . . Some drivers love that, makes their day, but no me. . . ."

" 'Course not."

"As you can see, I drove within inches of it and not a scratch, and these beasties weigh a good few pounds. . . . The unladen kerb weight of a Leyland Atlantean is . . . well, it's written on the side. . . . Guaranteed to make an impression on anything it comes into contact with. Aye, I saw the motor, walked over to it, clocked the guy, leaning back, eyes open, ye ken, sort of blue 'round the gills. I said, "Hey, he's no here for a wee nap," so I called the garage on the shortwave. . . . The cops came pretty quick, they told me to move the bus further up the terminus and to wait. Suited me." Jimmy Bird dropped the nail and crushed it under his shoe.

"You didn't see anybody else about the car?"

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Jimmy Bird shook his head. "Nobody about the car at all, nobody about in the scheme, just the postie."

"You've not seen the car before?"

"No, not before today, and this is the first run of the day, so I've no way of telling how long it's been sitting there."

"Did you touch the car?"

"Aye, tapped the window, tried the door. I mean I had to, the guy only looked dead. That doesn't mean he *was* dead. . . ."

"All right, we'll take your prints, just to eliminate them." Montgomerie still felt weak. His head was sore.

"You will?"

"Aye. Cause for concern about that, have you?"

"No. My prints are on record, though."

"Oh."

"Aye, I did a few daft things when I was a wean, theft by opening lockfast premises mostly. I avoided getting put away. I was lucky, some of my mates got put away in List D schools. . . . It didn't straighten them out. Came back better criminals, so they did."

"Address?"

"I stay in Irongray Street. Twenty-seven Irongray Street, G thirty-one. This more cops?"

Montgomerie looked up as a white car swept onto the terminus bay. "Dr. Chan," he said, continuing to write, "the police surgeon. He has to certify death before we can remove the body to the mortuary."

"So it can be cut up and that, aye?"

"When will it be convenient for you to go to the police station, Mr. Bird?"

08.40

Montgomerie sat as far from Donoghue's desk as he could without, he hoped, making the distance appear obvious. He was feeling a little stronger, fortified by a bacon roll from a corner dairy. He was awash with black coffee, but he still had the sense of being on automatic pilot, of not being wholly in touch, and he spoke as little and as softly as he could and exhaled through his nostrils. For his part, Donoghue drew steadily, if not lovingly, on his pipe, sat back in his chair, read Montgomerie's handwritten report, digesting, it seemed to Montgomerie, every word, and reaching the end, he read it over again from the beginning. Then at last he said, "Weedbinder." Montgomerie raised his eyebrows and nodded. He

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wanted to look alert, yet let as little stale breath escape as possible. "Strange name." Donoghue didn't take his eyes from the report.

"Certainly is, sir." Montgomerie tried to direct his breath carpetwards. "But that's the name on his cash-line card and his credit card. The car is registered to him. . . ."

"Home address in Busby, that certainly fits in with the sort of car he appears to own. Not my taste in motor car, too damned expensive if nothing else. So we have a suspicious death, all indications being suicide, I see."

"Yes, Dr. Chan felt it was suicide . . . but we'll have to wait for the postmortem report to confirm that, of course."

"Of course." Donoghue pulled on his pipe and held a long pause. "Has the deceased been formally identified?"

"Papa Foxtrot India left the locus to call at the home address as given by the car's registered-owner details. The deceased wore a wedding ring. If there is a next of kin, they will take her to the G.R.I. to formally ID the deceased."

"Uh-huh. Something to chase up on, then, if they don't contact us by, what shall we say, nine-thirty?" Donoghue paused to rekindle his pipe. "Tell me about him."

"Sir?"

"The man believed to be called Weedbinder. The deceased. Tell me about him."

"Well, sir . . ." Montgomerie's head felt heavy. He had a strong wish to be many miles away, or perhaps not so far, the next room would do fine well. He hadn't the strength or alertness to indulge in Donoghue's favourite game of "kicking it about." "Well . . ."

"Oh, come on, Montgomerie, I don't wish to burden you with my cares and woes, but I didn't enjoy my breakfast this morning. I was neither best pleased with my son because of his insolence, nor with my wife for defending him in my presence. I didn't enjoy my drive to work this morning because the M8 was reduced from three lanes to two for a distance of about five miles for no reason that I could see, and I had therefore to drive at a speed greater than my customary speed once I had cleared the tailback in order to get here on time, and now, at"—he glanced at the clock on the wall "—at eight-fifty, I am not in a mood to be patient."

"Sir."

"So tell me about the deceased."

"Well, late middle-aged, neat appearance, good quality clothing, sober taste . . ." Sober, that word chimed as Montgomerie felt that

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he suddenly knew what rock climbers meant by 'extreme climbing, through the cloud layer.' "The car was expensive, no cheap jalopy here. It appears to have been his, and there were a few items that you wouldn't expect in a hire car. A wee model dog on the shelf behind the rear seat, the sort with its head on a hinge so that it nods up and down each time the car goes over a bump in the road, daft if you ask me. . . ."

"Don't be judgemental. In fact, that intrigues me, an apparently prosperous man that goes in for infantile things of the kind you describe doesn't really fit with the image of a pragmatic businessman. I'd be interested to know the source of his income."

"I'll ascertain that as soon as I can, sir." Montgomerie glanced out of Donoghue's office window, along the length of Sauchiehall Street towards Queen Street. Angular buildings, glass and concrete, glinting in the sun under a blue sky. "The man himself," he said, returning to face Donoghue, "he was normally clean-shaven, but had early-morning stubble."

"So he was there overnight?"

"He'd been out all night, whether parked there or driving around I wouldn't like to say, probably driving around, if only because you just wouldn't be allowed to sit at peace in a motor in Easterhouse much before three A.M."

Donoghue nodded. "So he didn't rise early, wash, shave, leave home at five-thirty, get to Easterhouse by six, and top himself. He was out all night driving about, with God knows what thoughts driving about inside his head."

"It would seem so, sir. The clothing that he was wearing would suit a casual evening at home. . . ."

"So a man with a troubled mind?"

"It would seem so, sir."

"Had he money in his wallet?"

"Yes, sir. I counted it in the presence of the crew of Papa Foxtrot India after Dr. Chan had pronounced death. One hundred and fifty pounds in fives and tens, three credit cards, a half-used book of stamps, all placed and sealed in a production bag."

"So death, even if suicide, had caught him unawares. . . . No money problems, it seems, a half-used book of stamps, a man in mid stride. Any sign of injury?"

"No immediate sign."

"Immediate?"

"As in obvious. Nothing on face or hands, nothing on any exposed flesh."

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"I see." Donoghue nodded. "Evening clothing, you say?"

"Well, yes, sir. Not a business suit, not old clothing used when gardening, smart but casual, as they say."

"So." Donoghue nodded. "We begin to see what the deceased can tell us, even prior to meeting his next of kin and before the pathologist has drawn his first incision."

"Indeed, sir."

"We'll make a CID officer out of you yet, Montgomerie. Anything else in the car that caught your attention?"

"A couple of cans of super lager, both empty, and a flask, also empty but smelled of whisky."

"To help the pills go down, compound the effect. Lends further weight to the impression that he committed suicide. Now, tell me about the newspaper." Donoghue tapped Montgomerie's report.

"Well sir, it's a copy of yesterday's *Times* and of note is that the deceased appeared to have circled an ad in the personals column."

"It reads . . ." Donoghue consulted Montgomerie's report. "It reads . . . *Big Rab, Gregor, Spike, and Muckle also coming to the party. Scott.* So. Big Rab, Gregor, Muckle, Scott—names as Scottish as you can get. . . . So who is Scott?"

"That was to be my first line of enquiry," Montgomerie offered, through as near a closed mouth as he could. "Following consultation, of course."

"Of course. Something for you to do. . . ."

The phone on Donoghue's desk rang. He let it ring twice and then leisurely picked it up. "Detective Inspector Donoghue. . . . I see. . . . Right, very good, thank you." He replaced the receiver. "That was control. The deceased has been identified by his wife. He is indeed Sean Weedbinder of Giffnock Gardens, Busby. His wife is grief-stricken. She's been escorted home as of now. She has a sister who will sit with her but I'd like you to go and see her. You'd better take a WPC with you. It's still a suspicious death, perhaps murder, we still can't close our eyes to the possibility. Find out what you can. We should get the result from the post-mortem by midmorning. Go and see the lady, see what she can tell us about her husband."

"Very good, sir." Montgomerie stood, swayed, and steadied himself. He turned to go.

"Oh, and Montgomerie . . ."

"Sir . . ."

"A dull mind, duller than normal, breath which smells of strong coffee and strong mints . . . bloodshot eyes, unsteady on your

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feet . . ." Donoghue raised his eyebrows and then looked away from Montgomerie. "Consider this an unofficial warning; next time I have to mention it I'll have it recorded on your file."

"Sir."

"You've managed to smother the smell of alcohol. If you hadn't, I'd have sent you home."

"Sir."

"If you've got a problem, sort it. It's your career, your liver, and your wallet that you're laying on the line."

Montgomerie sank behind his desk, chastened, feeling small enough to hide behind a packet of cigarettes. Maybe this was his crash, his impact. He'd heard that alcoholics don't take that first vital step towards recovery until they have had some manner of confrontation with the problem, and maybe, if this was his confrontation, then it was gentler than most. Gentler than the guy who didn't realise he had a problem until his daughter told him she didn't want him at her wedding, and gentler than the guy who started drinking in Glasgow on a Saturday lunchtime and woke up in his room in his mother's house in Belfast the following Thursday with no recollection whatsoever of the intervening four days, both being anecdotes which had reached his ears. If, indeed, this was his confrontation. He picked up the phone. It was his confrontation if he let it be so; it could be a harbinger also, if he let it be so. It was up to him. He pressed nine for an outside line, consulting his notebook as he did so. Then he dialled a seven-figure local number.

"*Evening Times,* Tina speaking, how may I help you?"

"Police P Division." Montgomerie pressed the phone to his ear with his shoulder, leaving both hands free. "In respect of an ad in the personals column of yesterday's edition. Ad number four-one-two-seven . . ."

"Yes?"

"We'd like to know the name and address of the person who placed it, please."

"I daresay we could let you have that," Tina replied warmly. "I'll have to look it up and I'll have to call you back, you know, just to make certain it is the police I'm giving the information to."

"Of course. Just ask our switchboard to put you through to me, DC Montgomerie." He replaced the phone and glanced at his watch, 09:05. He sensed a hard day ahead, a hard rest of the shift. He picked up the day's edition of the *Herald,* scanned the head-

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lines, and then attempted the crossword. He found concentration difficult. His head still felt leadlike. Donoghue's words circulated inside his mind like an audio loop. He folded the newspaper and walked to the table and the cups and the kettle in the corner of the DCs' room and made himself another coffee. His phone rang. He strode across the floor to his desk and snatched it up. "DC Montgomerie. . . . Yes . . . put them through, please."

"Hello?" probed a soft feminine voice. "It's Tina at the *Evening Times.*" Montgomerie noted how musical, how lilting her voice was. A girl from Skye, he thought. "You wished details of the person who placed an ad in yesterday's edition?"

"I did." Montgomerie reached for his notepad and ballpoint.

"It was placed by a gentleman by the name of Hood. R. Hood, H-o-o-d. He gave an address in the west end, Three twenty-seven Oakfield Avenue, flat G-eleven."

"Unusual name." Montgomerie scribbled on his pad. "Couldn't be that the first name is Robin?"

"Not given," said Tina, still sounding beautifully Skyelike to Montgomerie's ears, "only an initial was given. And the payment was by postal order."

"Nothing so useful as a cheque. Pity. Well, thank you." He replaced the receiver and picked it up again and punched a two-figure internal number. "Hello, collator . . . DC Montgomerie . . . two names for you, and I confess both to be unlikely sounding, but I've heard stranger. The first one is a guy called Weedbinder, Sean, believed to be fifty-seven years, of Giffnock Gardens, Busby. . . . The second is Hood, R, as in Robin Hood. . . . No age, address Three twenty-seven Oakfield Avenue, G-eleven. . . . Anything known as soon as. Much thanks." Montgomerie glided round the corner of his desk and sank into his chair. He sipped his coffee and glanced behind him at the graceful curve of Charing Cross Mansions, and noted, as before, how the red brick glowed in the sun. The problem with alcohol, he thought, is what to replace it with. The thought of sitting at home . . . His phone rang. "DC Montgomerie." He yanked the handset from the base.

"Collator," said a relaxed, unhurried voice. "Nothing known to ourselves about the two names you mentioned. I can quiz the Police National Computer if you like, but you won't get a result for twenty-four hours, minimum."

"No, no thanks, not right now anyway. I'll see what I see first." He replaced the handset and picked it up again, pressed a second two-figure internal number.

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"Uniform bar," said the unmistakable voice of PC Phil Hamilton.

"Phil, Malcolm Montgomerie. . . . Is Elka Willems in the building?"

"Having her mid-shift refreshment."

"Right . . . when she comes out of the canteen ask her to wait at the uniform bar, I'll meet her there. . . . When is she due to finish her break?"

"Twenty minutes."

"About nine-thirty, right? Can you tell her I'll meet her at the uniform bar at nine-thirty? She and I are off to sunny Busby."

The street immediately told Montgomerie and Willems the nature of the house and possibly the nature of the home that they would be visiting. Montgomerie turned into Giffnock Gardens and he and Elka Willems met a vista of proud stone-built housing, clipped lawns, neat shrubs in full bloom, Mercedes-Benzes and Volvos and top-of-the-range VW camper vans standing in the driveways. The Weedbinders, it transpired, lived in an end terrace, larger than the mid terraces, having an extra wing needed to buttress the terrace as a whole standing at the ends of the row of houses like bookends. The Weedbinders' house had a dark-stained door and a highly polished brass knocker. Montgomerie and Willems left the car at the kerb and crunched up the gravel drive. Montgomerie gave the knocker two sharp raps, not aggressive, yet authoritative, and still yet respectful of the house and its occupants.

Mrs. Weedbinder proved to be a small, finely built woman, frail, thought Montgomerie, and she did not sit well in his eye as partner of the well-set man he had seen a few hours ago with his head lolling to one side and a bluish tinge about his mouth. She wore a slackly fitting lime green dress and flimsy carpet slippers. She looked pale and shaken. Montgomerie and Willems identified themselves and were led into the house, into a dark, cool hallway with a ticking clock and panelled walls, and then into the front room, in which a larger-boned woman in tweed and of middle years sat in a chair by the hearth.

"My sister," explained Mrs. Weedbinder. "DC Montgomerie and Miss Willems."

"Do you wish me to go, Jeannie?" the woman in tweed asked.

"No, sis." Mrs. Weedbinder fussed about the room. "If you'd stay." And to Montgomerie and Willems, "Please have a seat."

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The cops sat, Montgomerie in the chair opposite Mrs. Weedbinder's sister. Elka Willems, the uniformed officer, junior in rank to Montgomerie, glided elegantly across the carpet despite the ill-fitting serge uniform, and poured herself onto the settee. She would speak not at all, but would be ever attentive, not just listening to the answers but observing the body language of the respondent.

Montgomerie sat forward and addressed Mrs. Weedbinder, who had sat with modesty ridiculous to the extreme on a hard chair in the window, between a flowerpot stand and the paisley-patterned curtain. "I'm very sorry," he said, "that we have to call at a time like this, and for this reason."

"Aye." Mrs. Weedbinder sniffled. "It's some shock."

"This is what we wish to speak to you about." Montgomerie took out his notepad and ballpoint. "I take it that you didn't think your husband suicidal?"

"It is suicide then?"

"It appears so, but it has yet to be confirmed."

"Such a sense of betrayal. If he had problems why didn't he talk to me? . . . I am his wife."

"I didn't think that the police investigated suicide?" Mrs. Weedbinder's sister eyed Montgomerie with an inclined head and a gimlet eye.

"It's a non-natural death, we have to prepare a report for the coroner. If we uncover any hint of suspicion we'll have to send a report to the Fiscal."

"I see."

"So, Mr. Weedbinder had given no indication of anything amiss in his life?" Montgomerie glanced out of the bay window at the low-slung Citroen estate car as it was driven slowly and smoothly and silently down Giffnock Gardens.

A pause.

Mrs. Weedbinder looked at her sister, but, sitting behind her, was unable to make eye contact.

"You'd better tell them, Jeannie." The woman in the tweed twin set glanced up at the mantelpiece. She had a thin but determined voice. A sort of "class will remain behind for one hour" sort of voice.

"Aye. . . ." Mrs. Weedbinder, even allowing for the shock of her bereavement, was, in the eyes of both cops, clearly not of the mettle of her sister. It may well be that they had had a similar upbringing, had left the same home in their twenties, but in the

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intervening thirty years had been dealt different hands by life, their dice had fallen in different ways. "Aye. . . ."

"If you don't, I will. You know how I feel about secrets, especially about keeping information from the police. The British police, police by consent of the public. It is up to us to consent to give information willingly and freely in a spirit of full and true cooperation." Montgomerie's jaw sagged; such cooperation was rare indeed.

"The truth is, Mr. Montgomerie . . ." The gimlet eye fixed on Montgomerie, who quickly recovered his jaw line. "The truth of the matter is that my sister is destitute."

"I see." Montgomerie nodded. "I'm sorry."

"And so is my sister, I'll be bound. It has come as something of a shock, to say the least. Just prior to your arrival we were discussing—I was attempting to discuss—what is to be done about her future accommodation. It was proving difficult to make headway. Jeannie hasn't fully taken it on board, have you?"

Jeannie Weedbinder shook her head and sobbed into a handkerchief of dainty blue and yellow embroidery.

"Would you be good enough to give me your name, please?"

"I am Leonora de Souza."

"Mrs. de Souza," Montgomerie wrote.

"Miss de Souza, if you please. It was not my destiny to be taken in marriage."

"Miss de Souza."

"I did at one period in my life have cause to regret never to have married, but continued observation of my sister's marriage and its slide into moral turpitude has convinced me that I am the one more fortunate. I often wonder what seething corruption is hidden by the graceful facades of these houses and houses like them."

"Indeed. Could you give me your address?"

Miss de Souza gave an address in Clarkston.

"Fortunate you're so close."

"Indeed. I walked here in less than an hour."

"You walked?"

"I walked. Is there anything wrong with that, young man?"

"Not at all. . . ."

"It does no person good to be lazy. I am an early riser. This is the school holidays. I am not engaged in my employment. If I was able to get here in five or ten minutes by taxi, I would not have been able to alter the course of events. So I walked. I was a keen rambler in my youth. Fifteen miles a day with ease. Walked

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twenty-eight miles once, so Clarkston to Busby is not an obstacle. So . . ." Miss de Souza turned in her chair and addressed her whimpering sister. "Will you tell the officer or will I? The sooner they know, the sooner we shall be able to resume our very one-sided discussion about your future income and accommodation."

Mrs. Weedbinder continued to sob into her delicate handkerchief.

"I see. Well, after a thirty-year marriage"—Miss de Souza turned again to Montgomerie—"which was not the most successful of unions, one child, not a resounding success either but there's still time for him . . ."

"Stuart's a good boy," Mrs. Weedbinder wailed.

"He's your son, he's my nephew, my only nephew. He's lazy, he lacks direction, I rather fancy he's treading water just waiting to inherit this." Miss de Souza slapped the oaken fireplace. "But I rather fancy young Stuart is in for a wee surprise in the next day or two. The house won't be going to him now or at any time in the future, will it, sis?"

Mrs. Weedbinder sniffed.

"We had separate beds very early on in the marriage, didn't we, Jeannie, I fancy we know the reason for that now, don't we, Jeannie? . . . I'm just so grateful that Mama and Papa are not alive to see this. . . ."

"He was a good man."

"Oh. . . ." Miss de Souza cast her eyes ceilingwards. "Will you listen to yourself, Jeannie. Stuart's a good boy, living in a series of addresses in London, and when he comes back to Glasgow it's only because he's cap in hand, and he's 'a good boy.' A good twenty-nine-year-old good boy . . . and Jean, you can call *him* a good man, after he left you penniless?"

"The poor tortured wee soul took his own life."

"So." Montgomerie addressed Miss de Souza. He felt his head clearing, his limbs getting stronger. "What is the story? Please."

"The story, Mr. Montgomerie, is that Mr. Weedbinder, like myself, is a teacher. Was a teacher. But unlike myself, proud to be part of the education of ordinary children, so as to pass them on to university, Mr. Weedbinder chose to devote his time to what is now termed 'special needs' education, or even 'challenging behaviour.' Would you believe in plain Scots it means juvenile delinquents, the sort that break into your home, desecrate it, steal everything. The sort that steal your car for a joyride, death ride,

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I'd call it. He devoted his working life to them; whereas I pass on to the universities, he passed on to prison."

Montgomerie bit his lip. Behind him he felt Elka Willems stiffen.

"Mr. Weedbinder had, really from an early stage in his career, a headship of a residential school: an old house, a little private land, some woodland, a swimming pool, in South Ayrshire."

"Nearly into Dumfries and Galloway," offered the sobbing Mrs. Weedbinder.

"He'd spend weeks down there, especially in the summer months, coming home at weekends, but we know the reason for that now, don't we, Jeannie?"

"He didn't seem to be interested in that side of things, not after wee Stuart arrived."

"I see." Montgomerie nodded.

"You're beginning to get the picture, young man?"

"Aye." Montgomerie nodded.

"Somebody has been putting the squeeze on him. Is that the correct term for blackmail, Mr. Montgomerie?"

"Let's just call it blackmail," Montgomerie said. "That way we all know what we're talking about."

"He confessed to Jeannie last night."

"We sat up all night." Mrs. Weedbinder sobbed into her handkerchief. "We talked for the first time in thirty years. I haven't been to sleep."

"Poor you," Miss de Souza snorted. "It's what we're going to do about your accommodation that worries me. There's a box room in my house, you can have that, but you'll need to pull your weight if you move in with me. But all your furniture will have to go, all your bits and pieces. I haven't room and you haven't money to take it all into storage."

"Not my furniture . . ."

"Well, what can you do, woman, your house isn't yours, you haven't a penny piece to your name. You're sixty-two years old, woman."

"Miss de Souza. . . ?"

"Yes, young man."

"Back to the matter in hand. . . . How did all this come to light?"

"It came to light by confession. A man confessed of his sins to his wife, aided by some photographs. They're in the grate."

Montgomerie glanced at the fire grate, empty save for blackened remains of incinerated celluloid.

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"Horrible, filthy, beastly photographs." Mrs. Weedbinder's words were muffled by her handkerchief.

"I saw them. I would have kept them as proof, but when we came back after identifying her man on the slab . . ."

"He wasn't on a slab. He was on a trolley and we looked at him through a window. He was all nice and clean."

"When we came back I went into the kitchen to boil the kettle. She came in here and burnt them, nice little bonfire she made. Stupid woman, the police could have used those photographs." Miss de Souza took a deep breath. "There were about twenty photographs of him, as a younger man, with boys like wood nymphs, naked in the trees in the grounds of his school, or by the pool. All slender young things. My dear brother-in-law was in about half of them, and in what I think is termed a compromising position."

Montgomerie nodded.

"It appears one or more of those delinquents to whom he gave his working life have turned to screw on him ten, fifteen years later."

"It explains why we never had holidays for the last few years, why he refused to help Stuart, why he started to buy his jackets and coats from the Oxfam shop."

"It also explains why his savings have evaporated, why he took out a second mortgage, and why he couldn't make the mortgage repayments. Yesterday, in the midday post, was this." Miss de Souza took a Manila envelope from the table beside her chair. "Have you ever seen a foreclosure notice before, Mr. Montgomerie? This is a foreclosure notice, this particular one comes from the Grampian Permanent Building Society and it is in respect of the property in Giffnock Gardens, Busby, in which we now sit."

"All these years I thought that this was our house, bought and paid for, something to give wee Stuart when the time comes."

"Listen to you. . . ." Miss de Souza turned to Montgomerie. "He came clean to her, yesterday evening, it all came out. Not just his preference for boys, but his preference for boys placed in his care by order of the court. And that all the money that he had used, raised and used to purchase the silence of the man who has the negatives of the prints she burned this morning, all the money has run out. So last night, he got in his car."

"Said he was going for a drive," whimpered the woman on the hard chair. "I noticed my sleeping pills gone only this morning. I called my sister when I got a phone call from the police about his car. He said he had given all the money to a man called Bush."

"Bush," Montgomerie scribbled on his pad.

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"It's not unusual at all," Reynolds said, holding the phone to his left ear with his right hand curled round the back of his head. "It's a tried-and-tested method. Barbiturates compounded by alcohol, believed to induce death by going peacefully into the last sleep of all, in fact is a very unpleasant death. The person regains consciousness, chokes, panics . . . the one thing that is unusual is that it is a very unusual way for a man to top himself."

"Oh?" Donoghue held the phone to his ear by wedging it between his shoulder and his head.

"Well, the pattern of suicides is that men go towards death, women bring death on themselves."

"With many exceptions to prove the rule, I'll bet."

"Not as many as you'd think, not many at all. Women are passive, men proactive when it comes to suicide. A man will jump, a woman will place her neck on the railway lane, and not often vice versa. In fact, in twenty years as a pathologist it's only the second time I've come across a man choosing this method to kill himself. But that's my finding, death by barbiturate overdose, no sign of violence or other injury. Death took place about three to four A.M. today."

"Suicide."

"That's a legal definition. That's for the coroner to decide. I'll fax my report to you as soon as it is typed up. Good day."

Montgomerie and Elka Willems drove in silence towards the west end of the city of Glasgow. He turned off the Clydeside Expressway at Partick. Driving up the canyon of Byres Road, Elka Willems said, "It's the way your past creeps up behind you and taps you on your shoulder, even after twenty years. . . ." Montgomerie could think of nothing to say, so he just said, "Aye."

The address of the person who placed the ad in the personals column of the *Evening Times,* as given by Tina with her musical Inner Hebrides accent, was, Montgomerie and Willems found, one of those houses which still exist in the west end of the city. A large nineteenth-century house, blending gently and sensitively with similar neighbouring houses, yet different from them because it was still used for single-person or single-family private occupancy. The neighbouring houses on tree-lined Oakfield Avenue were occupied by university departments—the Department of Adult and Continuing Education and the Department of African Studies were just two that Montgomerie noted—or were given over to

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multiple occupancy by students. The address to which Tina of the *Evening Times* directed Montgomerie and Willems had, by contrast, no university brass plate by the door and only one name above the letter box: Bush. Montgomerie pressed the bell, which rang in a single strident tone, more akin to an alarm bell than a doorbell, he thought, but it wasn't, at least, as juvenile as the sort of doorbells often found in the schemes, which ring the Westminster chimes or play the first few bars of "The Flower of Scotland."

The door, solid gloss-black, opened silently upon the ringing of the bell to reveal a tall, slender man with silver-framed spectacles and a smooth complexion. He seemed to Montgomerie to be amused by the presence of the police on his doorstep. He had, it also seemed to Montgomerie, a self-satisfied smugness about him.

"Police." Montgomerie flashed his ID. The man declined to look at it but nodded towards Elka Willems. "So I gather from the lady's uniform. How can I help you?"

"Mr. Bush?"

"Yes, I am he."

"Do you live alone in the house?"

Bush raised his eyebrows. "It has all of fifteen rooms, not counting cellar and attic. My cleaner says she meets herself coming back. But yes, I live alone. I like it that way. It's not mine though, not yet, I've still got about half of the mortgage to pay off, but I'm getting there."

"We're looking for a Mr. Hood. R. Hood."

A look of relevance flashed across Bush's eyes.

"So you know him?"

"Why?"

"Just answer the question. Please."

"I don't have to. I should advise you that I am a solicitor specialising in criminal law."

"That's quite correct." Montgomerie nodded. "I too studied the law. But we're making enquiries in respect of a suspicious death which occurred this morning. It would be in your interest to cooperate."

"Oh. . . ." Bush removed the spectacles from his head and leaned against the door frame in an apparently genuine reaction of shock. "It wouldn't be in connection with a guy called Weedbinder, perchance?"

"Perchance it would."

"Would you care to step inside?" Bush stood to one side and Montgomerie and Willems entered the hallway; squarely built,

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angles and sharp-edged columns, pastel shades. A stairway, also sharply angled, leading off to the right. Upright chairs lined both sides of the carpet. Bush closed the door and indicated the chairs. "The inside doesn't measure up to the outside, most of the money is going on the mortgage. I wouldn't like you to see the inside unless you have to."

"We still may have to." Montgomerie sat on a chair; Willems sat a short distance from him.

Bush sat opposite the cops. "So what can I tell you?"

"All you can about Mr. Weedbinder."

"Old Sean, aye, I knew him and he knew me. How did you find me, the ad in the *Times*? Had to be, that's the only place I use the name R. Hood. It is, of course, an allusion to Robin Hood."

"Robbing from the rich to give to the poor?" Montgomerie slipped his notepad from his pocket.

"I'd prefer to say taking from the rich. There was no robbery."

"That's interesting, because Mrs. Weedbinder, newly widowed, mentioned photographs, she mentioned poverty, she believes that you were blackmailing her husband."

"She does?" Bush smiled, recovering his composure. His eyes once again gleamed with self-confidence. "She's wrong."

"The photographs?"

"I destroyed the negatives some years ago."

"Mr. Bush." Montgomerie leaned back in his seat. "I care not for riddles. Would you like to tell us the story?"

"Aye. I mean yes, yes, I will." Bush exhaled silently. "I don't know where to start. The beginning, I suppose, with my accumulating a criminal record."

"You are known to us?"

Bush shook his head. "Not now, spent convictions. Didn't stop me studying, getting into the law; it was a string of daft wee adolescent crimes, theft by opening lockfast premises in the main."

"In the main?"

Bush nodded. "In the main. I was well acquainted with the Children's Panel System, Home Supervision Orders, but it didn't stop all those thefts by OLPs, and eventually the panel had had enough and I was put away." Bush raised his eyebrows. "Not an easy time, and I still feel the pain of rejection. You can't say it was my fault, even though I did all those jobs and a lot more that the police didn't know about. Mind you, equally I didn't do some of the stuff that they did pin on me, but me and boys like me, we just reacted in the way that we felt we had to react, rose to meet what

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was expected of us. But anyway, I was sent to Millgarth. It was an independent List D school in darkest Ayrshire. I was interviewed at home by staff from Millgarth who felt they could offer me something and following the making of the Residential Supervision Order, I was sent there. Weedbinder was the headmaster and I got to know him very well, and the other staff too. If I tell you that shortly after my arrival I became known by him in the Biblical sense of the word, you'll get the idea."

"Oh. . . ." Elka Willems gasped.

"I quickly realised why I was vetted at home before a place was offered. It was nothing to do with my personality and motivation, it was to see if I looked right. All the boys at Millgarth were slim, no muscular thugs or fat boys at Millgarth, just didn't look right in the summertime when we sat around the pool, or played catch-me-if-you-can in the wood."

Montgomerie and Willems remained silent. This was clearly the sort of information that had to be given in the person's own time.

"It became the way of things, not a bad life once you got used to it. We were given money, cigarettes. . . . Then there were visitors, men, they'd arrive in their cars. . . . Sometimes they'd stay for the parties. . . . We had to answer to girls' names, not all the time, not in the classroom. I was Sandra." Bush managed a smile. "And the visitors, not just anyone, but in the law, commerce, the media. . . .

"Sean Weedbinder was hot on discretion, any remote possibility of anyone spilling the beans was the only thing that was certain to send him into a rage. But one day, one summer's day, by which time I was a senior and a trusted boy, he'd had too much sun and too much Liebfraumilch and he handed me a camera, a thirty-five millimeter, single-lens reflex. Told me to take some shots. So I shot the entire spool, twenty-four exposures. He took the spool from me and had the photographs developed by one of his mates in a private darkroom and that was that. Or so he thought. And so I thought too.

"But the nature of life in a school like Millgarth was different to normal schools in that boys would be invited into areas where they would not normally be invited, and the staff's private quarters were one of them. Some months later Weedbinder invited me into his study. Nothing unusual in that, but he left me unattended for a moment, and I wandered into his sitting room. In the bookcase was an envelope."

"The photographs?"

"Yes." Bush nodded. "Not just the photographs, but all the nega-

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tives as well. It was some time before he noticed them missing, during which time he'd had many other 'visitors.' He was furious when he discovered the loss, turned the entire place upside down, but I'd had home leave and the photographs were well planted in my room in my mother's house.

"You know there is a myth that delinquents are dull-witted." Bush shook his head. "I tell you nothing could be further from the truth. I mean, when I think of the ingenuity that went into some of the crimes that were committed by boys at Millgarth . . . But anyway, when I was about seventeen or eighteen, I decided to channel my grey matter. I picked up some qualifications and eventually got to university, this one, Glasgow. I was a few years older than most students and really below the salt compared to some of them. But I observed their classy manner and polished ways and let them rub off on me, and when I was telling my life story Millgarth became a minor public school. I'm not ashamed of my background, but the legal profession being what it is, if I wanted in, then I had to do a bit of covering up, a bit of camouflage."

Montgomerie nodded. "I know what you mean. I read law at Edinburgh; the rampant snobbery drove me off the course and back to Glasgow and the police force. I don't regret it unless I turn my thoughts to the money I'd be making now if I had stuck the course."

"You probably wouldn't be an alcoholic either." Bush smiled unpleasantly. Montgomerie's eyes narrowed. Elka Willems shuffled with embarrassment. "I'm sorry, but if your best friends don't tell you then others must. Your eyes are deeply bloodshot, your breath could set the house on fire."

"Just continue, please," said Montgomerie coldly, but he was stung by the observation.

"I forgot Millgarth, I forgot what happened. But it all came back in isolated memories when I was in my late twenties. Then I visited my mother, locked the door to my room, and found the photographs were still there, exactly where I had left them more than ten years earlier. So I called him up, identified myself. He wouldn't believe it was me. He remembered a wee street Turk from Govan, and now I was a smooth-talking professional with qualifications that could blow him out of the water. Oh, he was scared. It was lovely. He said, 'Tam, is there anything for me to be worried about?' I said, 'Let's meet, and it isn't Tam, it's Timothy now, but you can call me Sandra.' He said, 'Oh God,' and put the phone down.

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"So we met in a hotel near Queen's Park one afternoon. He'd aged, my how he had aged, but anyway I slid the envelope across the table between the coffee pot and the biscuit tray. He said, 'So it was you. I didn't think it was you.' He glanced at them and said, 'I see that you've retained the negatives.' I nodded."

"How long ago was this?"

"Six or seven years ago. Anyway, we had a wee chat and eventually we agreed to meet in the hotel on the Friday afternoon, in the week that I put an ad in the Monday edition of the *Evening Times,* calling myself Scott. He said he needed time to get money."

"Big of you."

"Hey, there was no pressure, no coercion, nothing. We met from time to time, had a coffee or two, he'd hand me an envelope, five hundred here, a thousand there, seven-fifty—that sort of sum. I daresay it depended on how vulnerable he was feeling. I never asked for money, never made any threat, I just let his imagination do the work and the money kept on coming. Confess it amused me."

"Amused you?"

"You see, when Weedbinder wasn't calling us Sandra or Yvonne or Jennifer, he would often consider our welfare, and one of his hobby horses was that of the importance of standing up to bullies."

"Fair enough."

"Indeed, and he was particularly fond of the story of the Danegeld. You know the story?"

"I don't," Montgomerie replied coldly, still smarting from Bush's observation about his eyes and his breath, accurate as it might be. Elka Willems, keenly observing, shook her head.

"Confess I don't know the historical details, but the gist of the story is that when the Romans left Britain in four hundred A.D., all the tribes staked their own bit of territory, akin to what is happening in the former Soviet Union even as we sit and speak. One of the tribes on the east coast kept having a spot of bother with Danes who had designs on their turf following the power vacuum created by the departure of the Legions. So the tribe said to the Danes, 'Look friends, we will pay you to stay away,' and the Danes said, 'Okay, we'll have a bit of that,' and so money was raised to pay the Danes not to invade."

"Danegeld?"

"Danegeld. It worked, but only until the money ran out. Eventually the tribe bankrupted themselves, the Danegeld ran out, and

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so the Danes invaded and occupied the area. The moral being that it's best to stand up to bullies at the outset, yet here he was handing me envelope after envelope of Danegeld. Rich, I thought, and I still hadn't threatened him with anything. I just placed an ad every few weeks and accepted the gift that followed the ad."

"Is that how you see it?"

Bush shrugged. "So who's the victim? I'm in my thirties, unable to sustain relationships, concerned about my sexual orientation, and I can make the observation about your alcoholism because I am an alcoholic as well, I'm just better at hiding it than you. I don't know what your problem is, but I drink because I go into a mood of cold anger about what Weedbinder did, and I'm one of the lucky ones, perhaps *the* lucky one, most of the ex boys at Millgarth are under the bridge, really well tucked up, wrecks of human beings, or they're in the slammer because they turned their anger outwards and attacked some guy. Me, I turned it inwards and hit the bottle. I'm a bout drinker, dry for days, weeks, and then a three-day bender. So I was molested when I was fourteen and spent the next few years being passed around to Weedbinder's friends. Should I weep for him? Or the high and mighty ones that rolled up in their Bentleys and Range Rovers and gave us a few pounds and a packet of cigarettes in exchange for our bodies? It was them, the visitors, who really forced Weedbinder's hand. They were names, big names. Weedbinder had a sense of obligation to them. He wasn't so bothered about himself, but he felt obliged to protect his friends, a sort of sense of honour buried deep within his twisted mind. He was so scared of a scandal; I kept it from him that there would be no scandal."

"You're certain?"

"Positive. In the first place, it would be hushed up and the ex-residents compensated. You see, the names were so big and so many that it would shake public confidence in the administration if it came out, and proving it would be impossible, no forensic evidence to corroborate statements, just the word of two or three alcoholics, ex-cons, lowlifers, against that of the likes of a cabinet minister."

"A cabinet minister?"

"I said the names were big. When I say 'big' I don't just mean 'big,' I mean 'big.' Anyway, last week he contacted me, told me he had no more money, that I'd milked him for everything. No more Danegeld, so I thought that it was time to let my longships appear on his horizon. I placed the ad. . . ."

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"Mentioning names of other ex-Millgarth boys?"

"Hardly." Bush smiled. "The pupils of places like Millgarth don't keep in touch with each other, we don't have reunions. No, the names I mentioned were the names we gave to the visitors; Big Rab, for example, is the cabinet minister. I remember him coming in a green Bentley, wearing a yellow waistcoat. He took a particular shine to me. But that was what Weedbinder feared, a scandal that would topple the Government, and it was all down to him and a single act of indiscretion with a camera."

"Is the school still open?" Elka Willems spoke for the first time. Bush shook his head. "That's a good question and I was waiting for it. The answer is yes and no. Yes, it's open, still called Millgarth, still a List D school, but it was taken over by the local authority shortly after I left. Sean Weedbinder was kept on as headmaster, but upon takeover the hanky-panky stopped overnight. The circus had had its fun and knew when it was time to move on."

"Same name, different animal?" offered Montgomerie.

Bush nodded. "Well put. If 'it' had still been going on, I would have blown the whistle on it."

"You wouldn't have been able to blackmail Weedbinder then?"

"I didn't blackmail him." Bush remained calm. "I told you I never threatened him with anything."

"A jury might see it differently."

"It won't get that far."

"I'll have to ask you to accompany us to the police station so that a proper statement can be taken."

"Certainly." Bush stood. "But you know I'm right. Even if what I did was to be construed as blackmail, under Scottish Criminal Procedure a person can't be convicted on confession alone, you would need to find the negatives in my possession. As I just told you, I destroyed them some years ago. I kept that from Weedbinder too, just let his imagination and fear do the work."

"Get your coat, Mr. Bush. Please."

It was 11:45 A.M.

Jimmy Bird stood swaying in Delaney's Bar. He didn't want to go home, not to his wife and the dragon. He'd been in the bar since around 2:00 P.M., shortly after his shift had ended. He thought about the car he'd seen that morning, the dead guy behind the wheel. Had to be a story, just had to. He wondered, what was the story? ●

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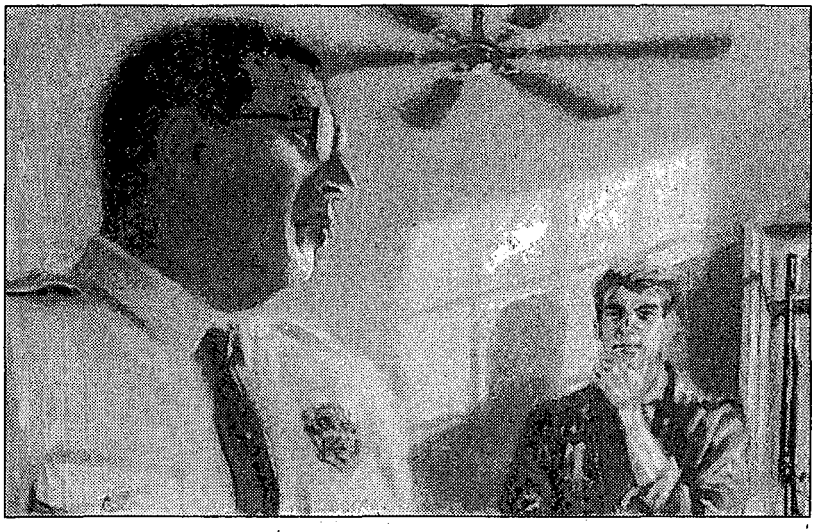

Art by Todd Lockwood

DEPUTY DOWN

by Jeremiah Healy

1.

It was one of William Least Heat Moon's blue highways, on the way from Boston to Florida. I'd spent two weeks working undercover for a high-tech company afraid a competitor was siphoning off its secrets. Netting enough money for a leisurely, kick-the-leaves ten days, I'd locked the pebbled-glass door with "JOHN FRANCIS CUDDY — CONFIDENTIAL INVESTIGATIONS" stenciled on it, packed a suitcase, and headed south.

The road was one lane each way, bordered by mossy trees and undeveloped marshes. A nice change of pace from the company's concrete bunker and the interstate's concrete monolith. I could have told you the state I was in, but not the town or even the county without having watched for the little one-by-three signs along the shoulder.

My silver Prelude, the last year of the first design, had just

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cleared a small rise. Through the open moonroof, I could see a V-pattern of ducks pacing me five hundred feet in the air. Then I started gaining on a rusted pickup in my lane. There was a Chevy compact in the oncoming one, so I eased off the gas. Good thing, too, as I drew even with a sheriff's cruiser, white with green and gold racing stripes on the sides and bubble lights revolving on the roof. The husky deputy was just about at the driver's door of the ten-year-old Buick he'd pulled over, more primer than paint on it.

That's when the deputy jumped backward into the path of the pickup in front of me, his Smokey the Bear hat coming off as his arms flew diagonally above his shoulders like a man clowning for his balance at the edge of a swimming pool. I registered the report of a shotgun and a black face and hand at the driver's-side window of the Buick as the pickup struck the deputy and sent him twenty feet through the air. The oncoming Chevy compact swerved and missed him but clipped the pickup, sending it sideways. My left front fender banged into the truck as I slewed right onto the shoulder.

When the dust cleared, the Buick was accelerating down the road. A black hand reached out the window, adjusting the mirror as the driver's head, a baseball cap on it, flicked twice that way, like a nervous bird checking its position. The Buick then wheeled off at the first exit, maybe a quarter of a mile south.

I climbed out of my car, wobbling a bit before my knees got used to walking again. The driver of the Chevy was a woman, sobbing

A nine-time nominee for the Private Eye Writers of America's Shamus Award, Jeremiah Healy has created one of the most humane private eyes in modern detective fiction, John Francis Cuddy. Books featuring the Boston sleuth have been translated into French, Japanese, Italian, Spanish, and German, and the first book was selected by the *New York Times* as one of the best mysteries of 1984. Readers interested in catching the latest of Cuddy's book-length adventures should look for *Invasion of Privacy* (Pocket Books), coming this July.

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into the chest of the older man driving the pickup. I heard him use "nigger" a couple of times in snatches. Moving to the cruiser, I opened the door and keyed the handset for the radio.

"Break, break, emergency. Break, break, emergency. We have a deputy down. I say again, we have a deputy down."

Then I had to yell to the older man from the pickup to find out where the hell we were.

"Quarter-mile, you say?"

"However far that first exit is from where the deputy's cruiser was."

"Might's well call him by name. Clint Mesketh."

"I'm sorry for your loss, Sheriff."

The man nodded. African-American, his accent sounded more Philadelphia "O" than Deep South. Fifty or so, his hair was shot through with gray, his eyes deep-set under bushy brows. He wore the same khaki uniform as the dead deputy, but the Smokey hat was on a coat tree against the wall to the side of his desk, and there was a spare tire of fat lolling above the Sam Brown belt as he sat in the high-backed swivel chair. The county building was old, a wooden-blade ceiling fan turning slowly overhead, but the air conditioner in the window was an energy-efficient newer model, and modern videotape, hidden-mike, and crime-scene equipment was ordered neatly on the shelves behind him.

I said, "I didn't catch your name."

"Doone. First name's Chester, so I tend not to use it too much. Born down here in the county, but my daddy moved up to Philly for the defense jobs, and I went on the force there for twenty before coming down here and getting myself elected by kinfolk and their friends."

"Thanks for the biography."

"Autobiography."

There was no smile on Doone's lips, but a little something played at the corner of his eyes. I decided I wouldn't much like being on the wrong end of his attitude.

He said, "This here's my first one's not so obvious."

"Obvious."

"On who did it and why."

My turn to nod.

Doone sat forward in his chair. "Car you got the plate on, the Buick, turned up abandoned in the supermarket lot. Been hot-

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wired out from the same lot earlier that morning, because the owner didn't notice it missing but sure as hell remembered he didn't park it where we found it. We found the shotgun, too. Double-barreled piece, sawed down to three inches, serial number filed off. Pretty common weapon otherwise, probably three thousand of them in the county. Side pocket by the driver's seat had a diagram of one of our two banks. Crayon on brown paper, couple words misspelled."

Doone paused.

I said, "Kind of . . . complete."

"Yeah. Tidy, even. Deputy stops potential robber; robber panics and fires; robber ditches car and takes off."

"Mask?"

"No."

"Note for the teller?"

Doone shook his head.

"Any need for the driver to be on that section of highway to go from the supermarket to the bank?"

That little movement at the corner of his eyes. "No. And about every soul in the county knows that stretch you were on is the one Clint most times patrolled."

"Maybe not so complete, then."

"Except for you, Mr. Cuddy."

Uh-oh. "I don't understand, Sheriff."

"We took statements from the man in the pickup you hit and the lady in the Chevy that hit him. You don't need to know their names. All you need to know is the man sees a black face behind every crime between Miami and New York, and the woman couldn't tell you and me apart at ten feet. That leaves us but one reliable, material witness to this tragedy."

"Sheriff, I just want to get my car fixed and be on my way."

"The boys are arranging for the towing, and Jimmy's is the only garage in the county can handle that Japanese car you're driving."

"Sheriff—"

"Jimmy tends to get backed up some, though. Way I see it, you might's well be a guest of the county for a couple, three days. Maybe walk around a bit with me, talk to folks, see maybe one of them jogs your memory."

I exhaled. "You wouldn't have any particular folks in mind?"

"Some. Feller named Jesse Surpock. Claimed Clint used excessive force bringing him in a month or two back."

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"Did he?"

"Jury saw it otherwise. Second, there's a brother and the wife. Clint's brother Luke and Clint's wife Julie, that is. Been some considerable strain in the family lately."

"Why?"

"Clint and Julie's boy Keith drowned last summer."

"Accidentally?"

"Definitely. But Clint came back from Vietnam a little . . . roughed up, and losing his son pushed him a lot further down the same road."

I'd been overseas, mostly Saigon as an MP lieutenant, but there was no reason for Doone to know that. "Sheriff, I still don't see—"

"You will. Fourth one I'm thinking about is another of my deputies, Sedell Warren. Sedell's a man of color, and Clint and him had more than words between them a couple weeks ago."

I turned it over. "And there're going to be a lot of people interested in how you handle the investigation into the killing of a white deputy by what eyewitnesses say was a black."

"One way to put it."

Doone stood up by placing his palms on the blotter and levering his rump out of the chair. "I think you're going to like the local motel. Call it 'La Hacienda.' "

"I can hardly wait."

2.

The less said about "La Hacienda," the better. Sheriff Doone got me checked in, room and meals courtesy of the county, drinks and anything dirty on the cable out of my own pocket. Then he took me to see Jimmy, who thought he knew of a "feller down to Columbia" with a yen for old Preludes and a scrap pile of replacement parts to match. Then we drove through town and over the railroad tracks to the proverbial wrong side of them.

Doone said, "Surpock's got a room over here. Done time for about everything the legislature can think to prohibit."

"Including car theft?"

"Take Jesse maybe twenty seconds to hot-wire this vehicle. Ten if he was sober, which he rarely is."

We pulled up in front of the worst house on a block of bad ones. Clapboard, narrow and two-storied, with sagging front porches on both levels, peeling paint, and a couple of scruffy kids playing in the dust with a couple of scruffier dogs.

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"Jesse, this man saw something happen this morning out on the highway."

The man didn't bother to look up at me. He hadn't bothered to look at me as he answered the door to the rear first-floor room or as he sat down on the bed, either. It was more cot than bed, actually, with a threadbare blanket, dirty top sheet, and mattress pad for fitted bottom sheet, lots of stains on it you'd like to think were from somebody spilling lemonade.

Surpock was forty or so, a sallow white man. Wiry to the point of being spindly; cords of muscle stood out from sagging flesh like rich relatives from poor ones at a wedding. The face had seen its share of fists over the years but not a razor for a couple of days. There was a sour smell to the room, empty bottles of a whiskey I'd never heard of lying on the floor near an old Atlanta Braves baseball cap.

Doone said, "Jesse," a little sharper.

Surpock looked up now, the eyes bloodshot and watery. "You gonna beat on me, too?"

"Nobody's going to beat on you, Jesse."

"Tell that to Mesketh, next time you see him."

"Next time'll be at his services, Jesse. Somebody killed him this morning."

The smile that started to cross Surpock's face seemed genuine, both as to surprise and pleasure, but he stopped it halfway as he remembered he had another uniform standing over him. "Man won't be getting no flowers from me."

"What do you know about it?"

"Nothing."

"Where were you this morning, Jesse?"

"Here."

"This room?"

" 'Course this room."

"Anybody with you?"

Surpock let the smile cross all the way. "Just Michelle Pfeiffer, but I had to throw her out, on account of that Madonna girl, she gets awful mad at me if—"

With the back of his right hand, Sheriff Doone clouted Surpock once across the cheek, knocking him flat on the bed.

The spindly man stayed down. "You said you weren't going to beat on me, Sheriff."

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"I lost a deputy today, Jesse. And you go and don't show respect for the dead or my investigation, what am I supposed to do?"

"I didn't have nothing to do with it."

"How do you know, till we tell you about it?"

We did, but Surpock was right. He didn't know anything. Or at least he wasn't saying.

The next house on our route was two miles away and two steps up from Surpock's. Also clapboard but only one-story, it had browned-over grass, some untended shrubbery, and an old Ford station wagon in a cracked macadam driveway. There was a hand-lettered sign that said, in different-colored paints, "PLASTIC WORMS," "SMALL ENGINE REPAIR," and "FACTORY OUTLET TOWELS."

Leaving the cruiser, Doone said, "Luke likes to cover the waterfront."

"I guess."

"Most likely find Luke 'round back. The worming goes better in the open air."

There was a pungent odor as soon as we turned the corner of the house. A big cauldron burbled over the wood fire, a barbeque grill next to it. A man in yellow rubber gloves and apron was pouring a steaming red goo from an iron pan into molds laid out on picnic benches. Four picnic benches.

Doone said, "Luke?"

The man turned. My only real look at Clint Mesketh had been his features in death, but I could tell they'd been related. The face in front of me was flushed but haggard, with sandy brown hair worn a little too long for style and big forearms under the gloves.

"Sheriff."

Luke Mesketh looked to me.

Doone said, "This is Mr. Cuddy, John Cuddy. He tried to help Clint at the scene this morning."

Mesketh started toward me, then seemed to remember the steaming pan and went over to the grill. He set the pan down and took off his gloves, returning to extend his hand.

"Much obliged for your trying."

I shook with him. "I'm sorry there wasn't anything I could do."

Mesketh nodded, as though he'd been hearing a lot of that in the last few hours.

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Doone said, "Kind of thought you might be with Julie, but this was on our way, so we stopped here first."

"I went over there. Appreciate your calling me, Sheriff. It was mighty . . . kind of you. But after we talked about things some, Julie said there wasn't much to do till the funeral, and she said she couldn't do that 'less you released the body."

"Coroner, actually. But she's right. You keeping busy?"

Mesketh followed Doone's eyes over to the picnic benches. "Might's well. Time like this, it's just easier to do the simple things." He looked to me. "Sorry you have to hear this, but the fact is, Clint and me had our problems, and Clint and Julie more problems still, so Clint's getting killed isn't exactly as . . . emotional as it might be."

I didn't know what to say, so I just nodded.

Doone said, "We're going around, talking to folks. Anybody called you or stopped by with any information?"

Mesketh moved his head slowly, left to right. "No, but if they do, you'll be hearing from me. We might not have been close, Clint and me, but this kind of thing, you just can't let it happen."

Doone said, "That's right, Luke. You can't."

Back in the cruiser, I said, "You called Luke about his brother?"

"I did. Knew they weren't close, but I figured it'd be good for Julie to have family there when I arrived to deliver the news in person."

"How far from the shooting on the highway to that supermarket lot?"

"One-point-four miles."

"And from there to Luke Mesketh's house?"

"One-point-eight."

"Time enough."

"More than."

I watched the countryside go by. Some trees I recognized, most I didn't, and the flowers, good luck. "Where are we heading now?"

"The widow's."

Julie Mesketh's house was painted a bright red. There were beds of tall, purple blooms around the foundation, and the grass was lush and mowed like a putting green. No bicycles or baseball bats or other signs of toys.

On the way to the front door, Doone said, "Go easy."

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The screen swung open before we got to it. A sturdy but attractive woman with auburn hair and green eyes stepped over the threshold. She wore blue jeans, a white blouse, and just enough makeup to tell you she hadn't been crying much recently.

"Sheriff."

She looked to me the way her brother-in-law had.

Doone said, "This is Mr. John Cuddy from Boston. He's the one radioed in to us about Clint."

"Oh." Julie Mesketh said, "I'm sorry if what happened inconvenienced you all."

"Not to worry. I'm—"

But she'd already looked back to Doone. "Sheriff, do you know when I'll be able to schedule the burial?"

He waited a moment before answering, and I guessed that he was thinking the same thing I was. That Julie Mesketh was deep in shock, unhinged generally, or just didn't give a damn about her husband getting blown apart that morning.

After he explained about the coroner, Doone said, "Can we come in for just a minute?"

"Sure."

We followed her into a small living room. The furniture was what you'd expect, and we all sat. On shelves and the top of the television, there were photo frames turned facedown.

Mesketh caught me noticing the frames. "Family tradition. We always bury the photos of someone who's died for a year after we bury them. Keith's will be getting raised again in just a few months."

She spoke pleasantly but without any feeling in her voice, as though she were passing the time of day on the Sunday bakery line. I said, "Your son drowned?"

"Yes. On a day last July, when his father just couldn't find the time to take him swimming. Clint wanted another child afterwards, but really, how can you have another child with a man like that?"

I looked down at the space between my shoes.

Doone said, "When I was by before, we didn't get much chance to talk, but—"

"To talk? To talk about what? How relieved I am that Clint's finally gone? You think prisoners and other deputies were the only people Clint beat up on?"

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Mesketh rubbed one bicep with the index and middle fingers of her other hand.

Doone tried another tack. "I was wondering, has anybody called or—"

"Called? Why? You see anybody here, Sheriff? You know of anybody's sorry to see Clint Mesketh consigned to the graveyard shift permanently? I just want to get that man into the ground as quick as possible so I can get on with what I might be able to have as a rest of my life."

Doone rotated the Smokey hat in his hands. "Look, I—"

"There is something you can do."

"What's that?"

"Come on."

She bounced up and started walking toward the kitchen. The sheriff and I exchanged glances and followed.

Mesketh was halfway down the stairs, looking back up at us. "Down here."

The basement was finished, walls whitewashed, older and worn furniture on a rug over the floor. The place had a musty smell to it, and a Ping-Pong table was folded irregularly and stuck in the far corner.

Mesketh approached a padlocked door. "Clint bought that fool table, then never had time to play with Keith. Why buy the thing if you're not going to use it?"

She opened the padlock and pulled back on the door. I could see into a small, hutchlike area with homemade gun racks mounted on the walls. There must have been twenty sidearms and as many rifles and shotguns, with slots for a half-dozen more of the longer weapons.

Doone didn't say anything.

Mesketh waved her hand at them. "Every time Clint'd bring somebody in, he'd take their guns for his 'private collection.' He never told you that, did he, Sheriff? No, he wouldn't, because he filed the number things off them. Before Keith drowned, Clint and Luke would take him out, show him how to be a man with one of these. That's the kind of game Clint liked to play. Bang-bang, not Ping-Pong."

Mesketh laughed, a very hollow sound in that space. Or anywhere else, for that matter.

Very quietly, I said, "Can you tell if any of these are missing?"

She looked me straight in the eye. "I'm sure I couldn't say."

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"Woman gives me the chills."

I said, "In more ways than one."

Doone turned the cruiser down a shady lane and kicked up his speed. "I didn't know about Clint's private collection."

"I believe you."

Doone looked over at me, then said something other than what I thought he had on his mind. "You getting anything out of all this?"

"You mean about who killed your deputy?"

"That's what I mean."

"No."

"Sedell Warren's on the next shift. Be a little easier on the man, seeing him at the office rather than driving out to his house. Why don't you have some dinner, I'll come back for you around seven."

"Why don't you join me?"

"Because after the day you had, you deserve a drink, and I don't drink in uniform."

"So, just don't have a drink."

Doone shook his head. "Nossir. If I sit down where there's some, I'll have some. Kind of day I had, too." The hands seemed to relax a little on the wheel. "You overseas, Cuddy?"

"For a while."

"Vietnam's what I meant."

"I figured it was."

He looked at me. "I didn't know Clint before his army time. I do know that being over there kinked him up but good."

"It did that to some, but not to everybody. Most people got discharged and moved back into their lives."

A head shake. "What I'm saying is, the way he was before his son died was bad, but the way he was after that was . . . Well, you saw his wife. Another year, I'd have had to ease him out of the department."

"I can see that."

"So his being dead is kind of a convenience to me."

"I can see that, too."

"Especially if it was some yahoo bank robber just randomly blew him off."

"Right."

Doone pulled into the lot in front of La Hacienda. "Only problem is, I don't believe that's what happened."

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"I didn't think you did."

He shifted into park. "And I'm not going to close the case that way if it didn't."

I opened my door. "I didn't think you would."

"How was dinner?"

"I'll live."

Doone smiled with his eyes and accelerated. "La Hacienda's got the best kitchen in town."

"Then they'd better check on what happens to the food while the waitress is carrying it to the tables."

"You're lucky I don't take offense real easy."

"Sheriff, I don't see you doing anything real easy."

The black man rising from the chair I'd used in Chester Doone's office could be called "colored" and the call would be accurate. His skin tone was almost honey, with blond streaks in his brown hair. About six-two, his left cheek was still bruised like a rotten spot on a pear, but he was shades lighter than the man in the Buick.

Doone said, "John Cuddy, Sedell Warren."

"Deputy."

"Mr. Cuddy."

Neither of us made any move to shake hands.

The sheriff sank into his chair. "Now that we're all like family here, let's share our day with each other."

Warren didn't think his boss was funny, but otherwise he didn't do anything but sit back down.

Doone said, "They still teach you about hot-wiring a car in the academy, Sedell?"

"They show us how it's done, Sheriff."

A judicious nod from Doone. "Cuddy?"

I said to Warren, "You don't look like the man I saw this morning."

"That's good, because I'm not."

"How do you feel about Mesketh being dead?"

Warren straightened a little. "He was a fellow officer. He died in the line of duty. I respect that."

"But . . . ?"

"But if I was going to kill him, I wouldn't ambush him. I'd call him out and beat him to death."

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Nice, even cadence to the voice. "I understand you tried that already."

Doone gave me the eye-smile.

I said, "I understand it didn't work out too well."

Warren straightened a little more. "He sucker-punched me."

"Why?"

"Because he was a coward."

"I mean, why'd you two mix it up at all?"

Warren looked to Doone, who nodded once.

The deputy came back to me. "It was in a restaurant. I was sitting at the bar, Clint and his wife were at a table, having dinner."

"And?"

"And he thought I was looking at her too long."

"Were you?"

"Yes."

"Because she's attractive."

"Because she's too attractive to take his abuse. Everybody knew it, but everybody knew she had to."

"Why is that?"

"If she ever tried to divorce him, or just walked out on him, Clint would've killed her."

"You know about Mesketh's basement?"

That threw him. "What?"

"His private collection of guns."

Warren paused. "I heard him talking about it once. That's all."

"I take it you don't have an alibi for this morning?"

"You can take a lot of things, mister."

Doone said, "Se-dell," the voice lilting a little on the second syllable.

Warren glared at me. "I've been with the department three years, but soon as most folks in the county hear that a black deputy had a fight with a white one, and the white one's dead at a black man's hand, they already got me tried and convicted."

Doone said, "You were, you wouldn't be wearing what you're wearing."

Warren looked down at himself. "What, the uniform? The badge, the gun?"

Doone closed his eyes. "Take your pick."

"You mean that about him not looking like the man in the Buick?"

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Doone and I were alone in his office. "That's right. The man I saw was a lot . . . blacker."

"That mean you don't think Sedell's the one that did it?"

"Not necessarily. It'd be a great deflection for him, to wear a mask or darken his skin temporarily, throw off any witnesses."

"Seems to me the killer went to some trouble to have witnesses."

"I was thinking the same thing, Sheriff."

Doone pursed his lips. "While you were having dinner, I called the coroner. He's releasing the body to Julie, and she's having the burial tomorrow afternoon."

"No wake?"

"We'd call it a 'viewing' down here, but no."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I was hoping you might come by, take a look, see if anything—"

"Jogs my memory."

The little tug at the corners of his eyes. "Right."

"No thanks, Sheriff."

"What's the matter, you don't like *sleep*ing at La Hacienda, either?"

"While I was waiting for my food, I called Jimmy. He said my car'd be ready first thing tomorrow."

"Jimmy, now, he was being a little hasty. I called him, too, a bit after you did. Turned out he was wrong about that part from Columbia. Your car won't be ready till after the funeral."

I looked steadily at Doone. "Thanks."

"For what?"

"For going to the trouble of calling Jimmy like that."

A massive shrug. "Don't mention it."

4.

"So, you take in any sights this morning?"

"Sheriff, I don't have a car, remember?"

"Not a bad town for walking."

"I sat by the pool, reading."

"Well then. That's about what you'd be doing down in Florida, right?"

"About."

We were standing outside a Protestant church in the middle of the town. There were thirty or so uniforms like Doone's and more in slightly different colors and patches and sidearms from all over the eastern seaboard. A lot of the officers looked rushed and fid-

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gety, like they hadn't had much time to get there and were surprised by the brevity of the ceremony inside and the fact that they outnumbered the civilian mourners three to one.

The hearse carrying Clint Mesketh's coffin came around from the back of the church, turning onto the street and slowing to allow the crowd to form a throng behind it. Julie Mesketh and her brother-in-law Luke were at the head of the processional with a minister, just behind the hearse itself. Then the people from the Sheriff's Department, both uniformed and plainclothes, including Sedell Warren. Then civilians, most of the men in light-colored dress suits, Jesse Surpock in a collared shirt and slacks, a dark stain down the right leg. The officers from the other agencies brought up the rear, with Chester Doone and me trailing near the back of the pack. I thought Surpock looked nervous, maybe from all the uniforms walking point and drag around him.

We went slightly uphill, then down again, maybe half a mile before the street ended at a cemetery gate. Everybody filed in after the hearse, arraying themselves around the only open gravesite. Nobody had anything to add to the minister's short reading, and we were drifting back toward the church fifteen minutes later.

Doone said, "Anything?"

"No."

He shook his head. "Can't see holding you from your vacation anymore, then. Lift to Jimmy's?"

"That would be nice."

Getting into his cruiser, I said, "You think she'll spring for a headstone?"

Doone looked across the parking lot, then ratcheted the steering wheel into place. "I doubt it."

Next to the church, Luke Mesketh held the passenger's door of his station wagon until his sister-in-law settled into her seat. Then he came around to his side, got in, and rolled down the window. Sticking his arm out, he adjusted the rearview, and then flicked his head twice at it before pulling away.

I said, "Jesus Christ."

The smell seemed a little less pungent this time around. Maybe the wind, maybe the materials, maybe just me expecting it. He turned around, kind of sharply, then bent over the molds again. "Saw you at the funeral. It was good of you to stay over for it."

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I said, "Was it more that you hated him or more that you lusted after her?"

Luke Mesketh froze.

"Or maybe Keith was the last straw, though you waited kind of a long time to do something about that."

Mesketh turned to me, the gloves and apron and pan giving the scene a surprisingly domestic flavor. "What're you talking about?"

"I'm guessing it was Julie. You wanted her, he had her, he'd never let her go. You knew his routine. You fix small engines, it wouldn't be that hard to hot-wire a car's ignition. You used some of your plastic there, black plastic, to make a mask and gloves, wore a baseball cap to cover the hairline. Good enough to fool somebody from a distance and even your brother up close, at least for a few seconds. But you had to be sure it was him in the cruiser, so you adjusted your outside mirror to see him walking up to the Buick."

Mesketh just stared at me.

"Then you shot him and took off. Where'd you get the gun, Luke? His private collection, or just one you picked up and sawed off?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You saw your brother driving your sister-in-law crazy, especially since your nephew died. You figured the diagram and the gun would look good, and the black disguise a nice deflection. And it was."

"The man wore a mask, how can you know who it was?"

"You've got a habit of flicking your head at the car mirror, Luke. It's like a fingerprint for you."

He wet his lips, looked around his yard. "Why are you saying these things to me?"

"Your little setup's cost me time and money, Luke. Time and money. I've been stuck here when I could have been relaxing on a beach somewhere, and I figure to be compensated for my time."

"Compensated?"

"Yeah. If I have to tell the sheriff what I know, it'll be another couple of days, easy. So I figure, since I was on vacation, I should get double-time, not just regular rate."

"What . . ." Mesketh licked his lips again. "What are we . . . talking here?"

"Let's say twenty-five hundred, round numbers."

"I . . . I can't raise that kind—"

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"Luke, Luke. I don't know what the going rate is down here, but if you'd spent just half that in Boston on a competent button man, you wouldn't be where you are now. So some of that three thousand is like tuition, you know? Tuition for the lesson you learned."

"Three . . . ? But you just said twenty-five—"

"Education's expensive, Luke, and higher education's the most expensive of all. Better commit now, before tuition goes up any more."

"Three . . . thousand. All right, fine. But it'll take me—"

"Awhile. I thought it might. I'll be back, say in a week? I'll stop in on my way up from Florida. That'll give you time, and maybe if I see you and get all that cash, I won't have time to visit with Sheriff Doone. What do you say?"

He didn't say anything.

"That seals it then, Luke. See you in a week."

As I got to the front of the house, I reached under the lapel of my suit jacket and unclipped the hidden mike. "Sheriff, you get all that?"

The muted voice at the back of my collar said, "Loud and clear. I hope you were kidding."

Kidding. "About what?"

"About maybe not having the time to come back and visit with me."

I turned off the mike and climbed into the driver's seat of the Prelude. ●

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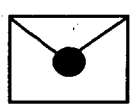

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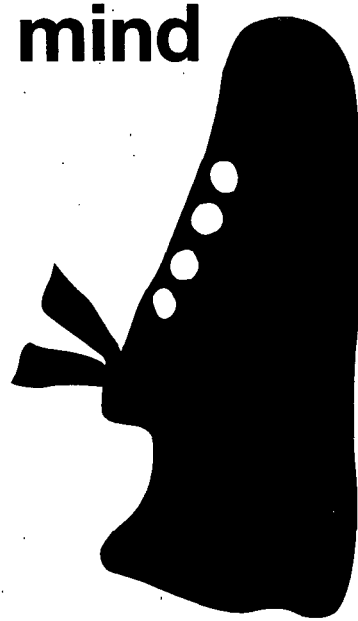

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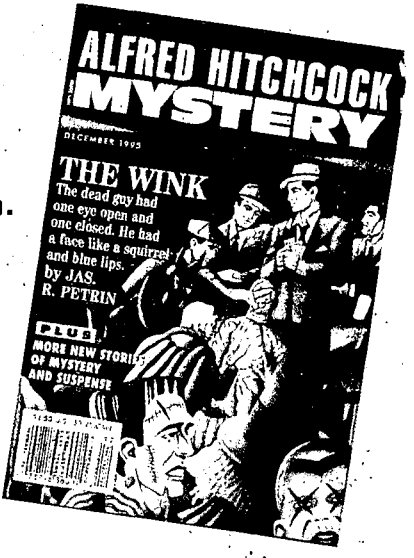
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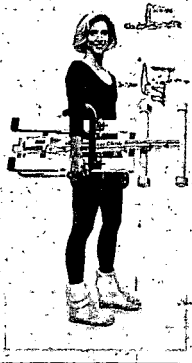

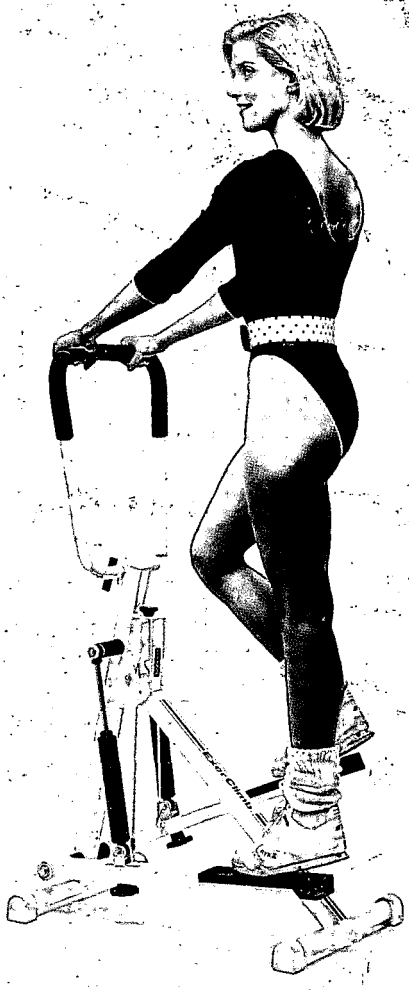

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